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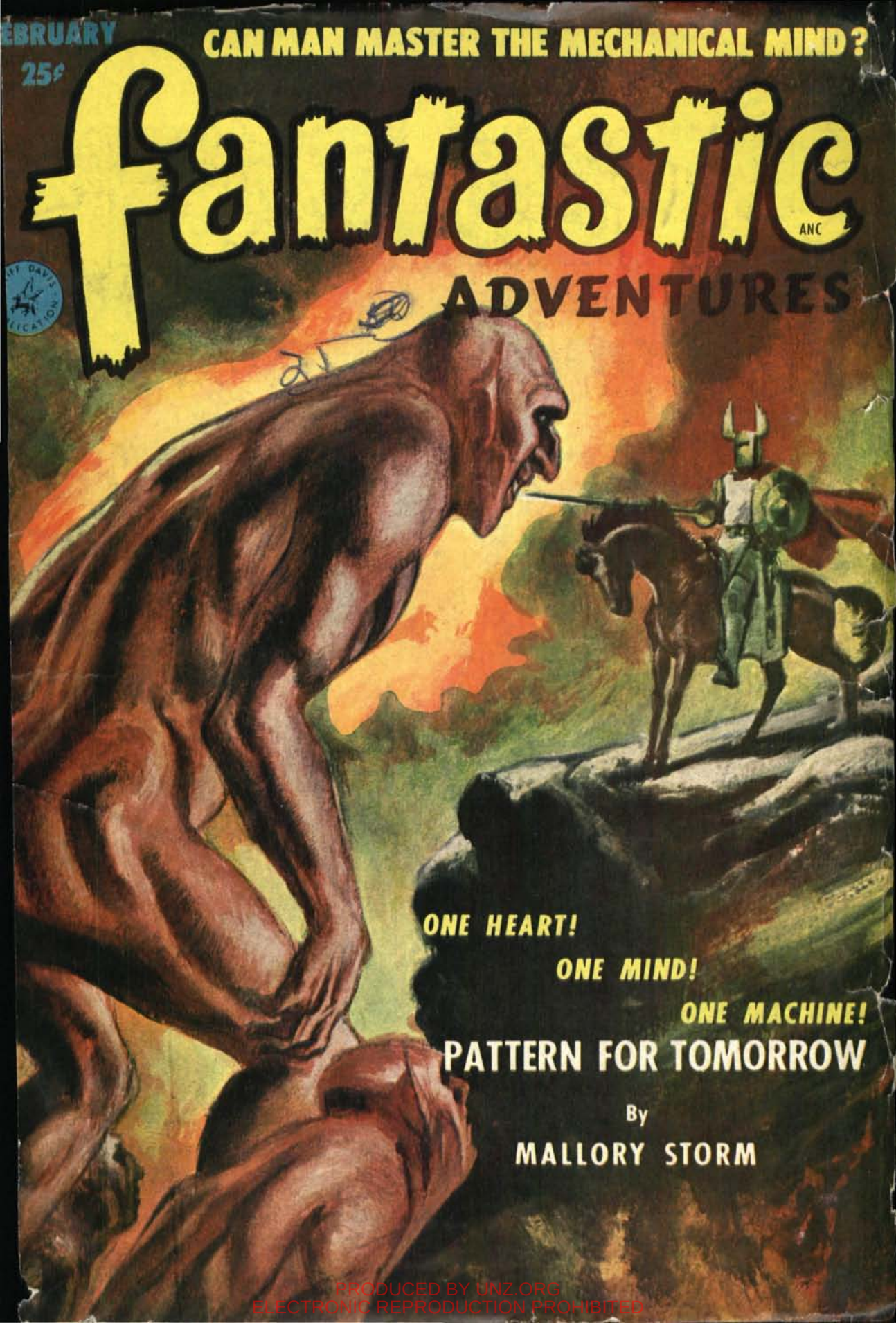

ONE HEART!

ONE MIND!

ONE MACHINE!

PATTERN FOR TOMORROW

By

MALLORY STORM

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

AS A result of our years of editorship, we have come to the conclusion that a set of special commandments would be in order for this society of harrassed characters to which we belong.

SO, TAKING as a calculated risk the possible envy of our brother-editors, we are hereby setting down our commandments with the wistful hope that perhaps one day we may be regarded as the Moses of our profession.

1 THOU SHALT not worship nor look with awe upon, the idol known as the big-name writer. Thou shalt be as severe in thy criticism of his story, as in that of the novice. Else, during thy blind worshipping of him, he may slip you a stinker.

2 THOU SHALT labor mightily over thy desk for six days each week, and spend the seventh day checking the newsstands to see how rapidly the piles of thine unsold books have decreased.

3 THOU SHALT love all thy neighbors throughout the land and entertain them well, lest they stop buying thy magazine, thus making for long and hungry days.

4 THOU SHALT not steal an author from another editor by paying him a higher word rate until thou hast exhausted all other lures, such as less critical word count, freedom from the editorial blue pencil, more genuine love and understanding.

5 THOU SHALT not give offense—insofar as it is in thy power—to any reader's standards of taste and morality, pride and dignity.

6 THOU SHALT not listen only to the tinkle of the coins in thy pocket. Thou must remember always that thou carriest a responsibility to thy audience.

7 THOU SHALT not look down upon thy readers, for they in their wisdom are as great as thee in thine.

8 THOU SHALT honor thy readers and thy writers, that the days of thy magazine be not numbered.

9 THOU SHALT not covet thy competitor's magazine, but shalt make thine better.

10 THOU SHALT never lose a manuscript, nor stain its pages with coffee, jelly doughnuts, chocolate, or finger-prints.

AND THAT'S that.

WE NOMINATE as our choice for the "story of the month", Paul Fairman's "A Child Is Missing" (page 56). In our opinion, this contains a rare combination of suspense and sympathy, tenderness and terror—handled with consummate skill.

..... LES

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All Stories Complete

PATTERN FOR TOMORROW (Novel—30,000) ..... by Mallory Storm 6

Illustrated by Ed Valigursky

Death and destruction ravaged the earth in the instant the bombs fell. But it took a knight in shining armor, riding a disabled taxicab, to catch up with the future and decide its fate

A CHILD IS MISSING (Short—3,600) ..... by Paul W. Fairman 56

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He was just a helpless little boy, frightened and lost amidst strange surroundings. Yet, an entire city trembled in terror when he walked the streets searching for shelter. Why?

SPACEMEN DIE HARD (Novelette—11,500) ..... by Chester S. Geier 64

Illustrated by H. W. Kiemle

Being the best pilot in space is not enough, Dave Braden learned when he set out to wreak vengeance on Murphy. Sometimes you have to know when to make the right mistakes

PATTERN IN THE DUST (Short—3,500) ..... by Ivar Jorgensen 86

Illustrated by Ed Emsler

What would you do if you awakened one morning to find it was a hundred years since you'd gone to bed? Would you stay to build a past—or go back to tear down the future?

"WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND?" (Novelette—15,000) ..... by Milton Lesser 94

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When a math professor begins to teach a student fancy figures outside of school, there's no telling where they'll wind up. For a future with Jean, Dr. Rome juggled a few years around

Front cover painting by Leo Ramon Summers
illustrating a scene from "Pattern for Tomorrow"

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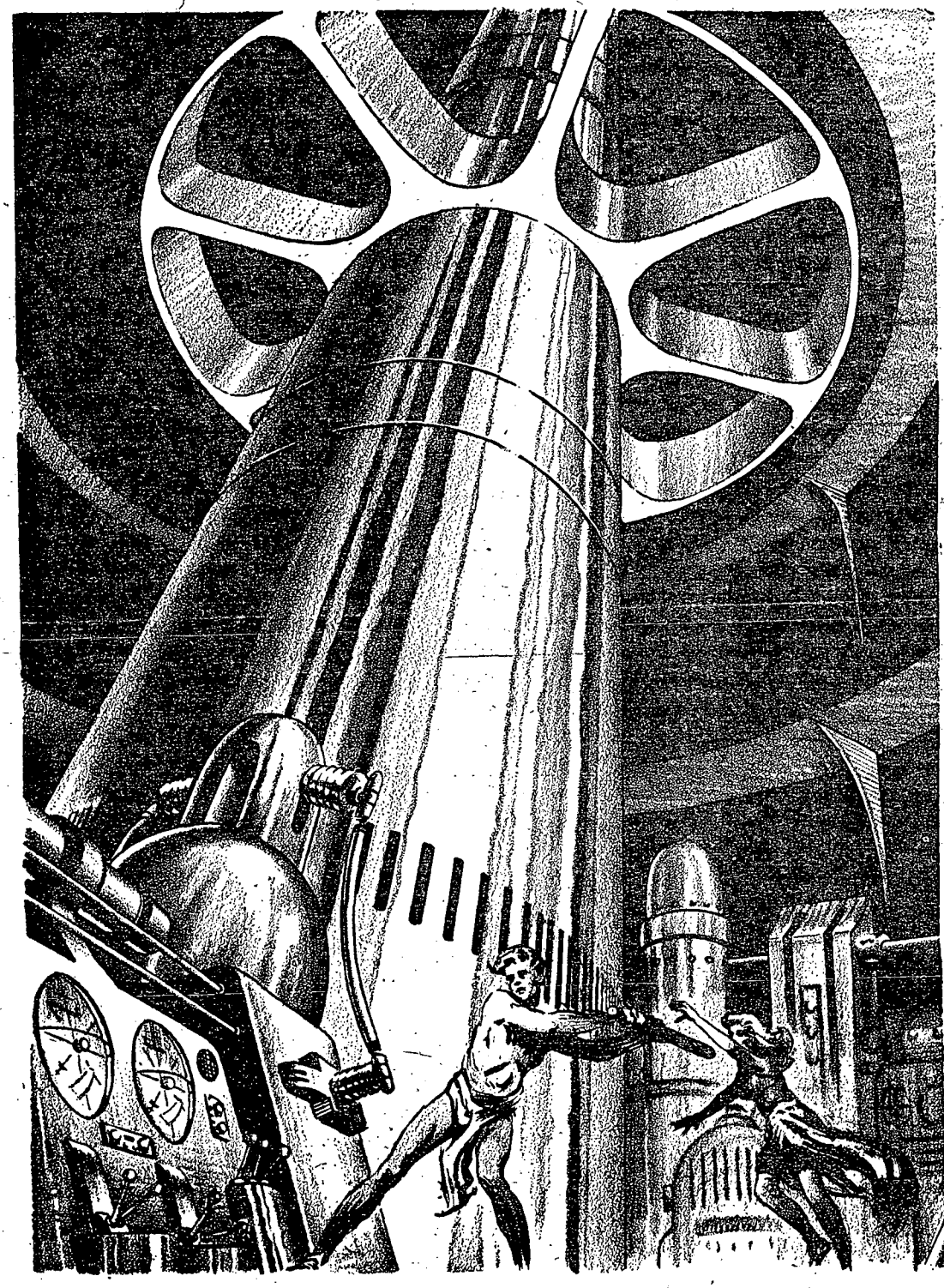

The machine had to go, even though it meant a million lives

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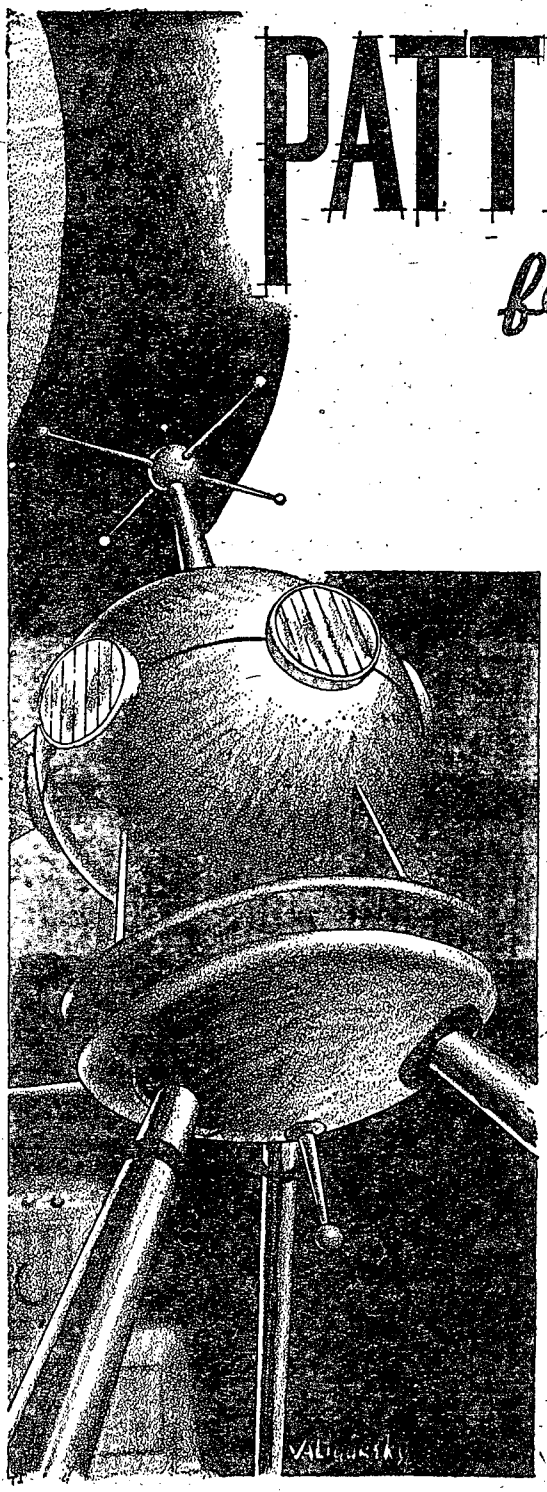

PATTERN for Tomorrow

What better way to enslave a world than to control the heartbeats of your subjects?

By Mallory Storm

SIR GEOFFERY GARHEART was as illustrious a knight as ever quaffed wine at King Arthur's table. Even, perhaps, the loudest and most unpopular, albeit not the most valiant. He did, however, have a clearer perception of the future than the other swashbucklers who made famous the name of Arthur.

It was with the future in mind that Sir Geoffery visited Merlin the Magician late one night and offered that wily fraud a great deal of money. "There is much in life, especially for a man of my position," Geoffery said, that wily fraud a great deal of money.

Merlin nodded and went on mixing a foul brew.

"There is the adulation of the louts, and good food and maidens—"

"Aye—maidens," Merlin agreed.

"In fact so much is there that one would not care to die prematurely."

Merlin was a perceptive scoundrel and he sensed a flood of gold. Therefore he strove to be helpful. "It would indeed be tragic if so satisfying a life were cut off in its full bloom by an un-

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fortunate thrust on the field of honor."

"Exactly. And it is for that reason I came to you. It has been bruited about that you have come upon a magic potion."

Merlin chuckled. "Indeed I have."

"And what does this potion contain?"

"A number of ingredients, Sir Geoffery. The powdered carcass of a dried frog—"

"Hmmm. Not difficult to procure."

Already Merlin knew which way the wind blew. He smiled craftily. "Ah, but the frog must have certain markings known only to me. Then there is the right kidney of a doe, shot by a poacher who must be black of heart."

"All poachers have black hearts."

"Yes, but the shades vary by comparison. Also, there must needs be a cobweb swept from the foul skirt of a betrothed witch at the precise moment of dead midnight. The potion, good sir, is not easy to concoct."

"Very well," the plumed nobleman grunted. "How much will it cost me?"

"A full bag of silver, my Lord," Merlin purred.

"And what do I get for my silver?"

"A blessing which will protect you from harm while jousting on the field of honor or while fighting the wars of your liege lord. No sword shall touch your skin; no pike shall pierce your vitals and end the pleasant hours with your maidens."

"And what guarantee have I that the potion will work?"

Merlin, that Devil's child, enjoyed toying with these simple-minded oafs. "What guarantee have you that it will not, my lord?"

Geoffery considered, and while Merlin chuckled inwardly, said, "Very well. When shall I come again?"

"At this time on the morrow."

Upon the following night, Sir Geoffery returned to the evil tower and was handed, in exchange for his silver, a small vial containing white powder. He frowned. "And now that I have it, what do I do? Take it with a draught of wine? Place it under my pillow?"

Merlin had a fierce and contemptuous urge to say: You will powder, with the contents of this vial, the breasts of your favorite maiden when you retire for the night. Or: You will put it into the trough in your pigsty and root for it along with the other swine.

Either manner of use, so far as Merlin was concerned, would have produced the same negligible results. But, on a whimsy, he said, "You will approach your favorite metalsmith and command of him a new suit of armor. It must be the finest product of his career. And this above all—when the metal is molten, bubbling bright and hot, then will he pour the magic potion into the vat." Merlin's smile was little more than a smirk, but he knew the stupid brain with which he dealt. "May your life and potency be long, my lord."

And strangely, for one with so hazardous a calling, Sir Geoffery's years number ninety seven. But whether or not he continued to excel in fundamental functionings during those latter years, is not recorded.

* * *

JENNIFER called at five-thirty. Brian, his mind full of the Wilson contract, the Davis deeds, and heaven knew what else, picked up the phone, remembered, and was washed over with a sense of guilt. He said, "Yes, darling. Almost clear now. You can lay out my tux and I'll be right along."

That accursed party at the Flemings! He'd promised Jennifer faithfully he'd—

But Jennifer was gasping in horror. "Brian! You don't mean you've *forgotten!*"

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"Of course not, darling. Had it in mind all day."

More quietly now, with sweet venom. A cat with its paw on the mouse's tail. "Then exactly why do you wish me to lay out your tux?"

"Why—why it's formal isn't it—oh my gosh!"

"It happens to be a masquerade, my pet."

"Yeah—yeah. I just remembered."

"And I take it you've done nothing whatsoever about arranging for a suit of armor. You were going to do it first thing this morning. Or are you foggy on that point also?"

Thoroughly contrite, Brian sought desperately to make amends. "Tell you what I'll do, honey. The stove-pipe suit is in a little antique shop on North Clark Street. I'll dash out there before the place closes, have the guy help me put it on and then take a cab straight to Evanston. I'll meet you at the party and everything will be all right."

Jennifer was a trifle annoyed that Brian's nimble brain had found a way out. It wasn't exactly fair. He'd forgotten the party completely and, for that sin, she had a right to push in the knife and twist it a little. "Brian, I wonder if you realize how rude and inconsiderate you really are?"

"I'm sorry as all hell, darling. I really am. But that shop's liable to close, so every minute counts. I'll have to get going. See you at the party."

"Brian!"

"See you at the shindig. Love you, baby. 'Bye now."

Thus did Brian Courtney speak a final farewell to his beautiful, venomous, beloved Jennifer. He sighed with relief at getting out from under the lash so neatly, locked the office, and ran down four flights of stairs, rather than wait for the elevator.

He was moderately lucky in getting a cab, snaring the fourth vehicle going north on LaSalle Street. He needled the driver into breaking a few speed laws and gave him five dollars at the North Clark Street address. He paid Jennifer the tribute of a moment's panic when he saw what appeared to be only a small night light burning in the window of the dusty little antique shop. Closed! Murder!

But a shadow moved across the window and Brian found the door still unlocked. As he entered, a small bell, disturbed by the door-movement, tinkled drowzily and the round-shouldered little proprietor looked up from closing a box of sea shells. His voice was thin, reminiscent of sweaters worn indoors, red and perpetually dripping noses.

"I was just closing up. It's after time."

"Then I'll have to make it worth your while to stay open a few minutes longer. I'm interested in that suit of armor there by the window."

THE PROPRIETOR stared blankly. "You're interested in that suit of armor?" His tone mirrored unbelief—and more. It expressed the conviction that anyone interested in a suit of mail at this hour was a person who would bear watching.

"You want to *buy* it?"

"Not exactly. I wish to rent it for tonight only. I'm going to a masquerade and my wife will be Guinevere or the Maiden of Shalot or something. It's imperative I get the suit."

The proprietor immediately revealed himself as a very poor businessman. "Oh, I see. Then you don't want that suit. It's too heavy. You'd be better off going to one of the costume companies on Wabash Avenue. They have lighter ones made to—"

"But they're all closed and I'd planned on using this one. I saw it in your window on the way to the office.

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I'll make it worth your while."

"Very well. I just wanted you to know what you're getting into." He approached the ominous-looking suit of mail, eyeing it with distinct distrust. "I'd be glad to sell it to you. Do you have a big house?"

"No—no. Only a small apartment. But I want you to profit on the deal. Shall we say fifty bucks for the rental and for your help?"

"What help?"

"I'm late for the party. I've got to get into it and ride to Evanston."

The little antique shop keeper showed a surprisingly literal mind. "I'm afraid you can't ride in the thing. It isn't equipped to—"

"Of course not," Brian snapped. "I'll get a cab." He jerked off his raincoat and jacket. "But I'll need help in getting the monstrosity on."

"Fifty dollars, you say?"

"Yes. Come help me, man. I'm in a hurry."

Brian speedily discovered it was no fun crawling into a cold, hard, unyielding assortment of iron. No thought had been given to comfort in the manufacture of the suit and Brian's underwear gave no protection at all against the pinches, scratches and lacerations that fell to his lot.

"Ouch! For lord's sake! Take it easy, will you?"

"I'm sorry, but a certain amount of force is necessary in donning a coat of mail."

Brian winced as the metal cloth covering exposed sections ground into his flesh. "They must have been supermen in those days. Or maybe this thing was built for some front hall."

"Oh no! The piece is authentic—or at least I believe it is. The suit is supposed to have come down from ancient England—from the days of King Arthur. Of course that was a long time ago and one can't be positive."

Brian took two forward steps and almost fell on his face. His makeshift valet caught him in the nick of time. "Oops! Careful, sir. Walking around in mail requires a little practice. A knack, so to speak."

"You're not fooling, but I haven't got time to practice. If you'll roll up my clothes and then call me a cab I'll be on my way."

"Certainly."

"And you'd better explain to the cabby. I don't want to scare anybody to death when I walk out the door in this rig."

THE CAB driver, an amazingly cosmopolitan individual, took the armored figure in his stride. "Careful ya don't rip the seat leather with them steel britches."

"I'll watch it very carefully."

The cab nosed out into traffic.

"It's very good of you to take all this so—so casually," Brian said. "On the face of it, it must seem rather silly."

"Think nothing of it, brother. You ain't no problem. Now the other day a dame crawls in—wants to go to Wilson Avenue. I get there and look around and, man, she ain't got a stitch on! A psycho what took off all her clothes and threw 'em out the window along the way. You talk about silly things, brother—I could write a book."

"No doubt. And by the way, you'll have to help me out of the cab when we get to Evanston. I doubt if I'll be able to make it alone."

"Sure—sure. Funny, ain't it—what people'll do for fun? Take off their clothes—put on iron ones. People is sure goofy." Silently, Brian agreed.

But it so happened that he got no aid in leaving the cab. Nor did he arrive in Evanston. This because a fateful moment in world history—long held in abeyance—came at last to pass. A moment of dread finality from which there was no turning back—no

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retreat—no salvation.

The Bomb.

It struck just north of the Chicago River between Clark and Dearborn Streets. The haughty gleaming buildings southward and eastward of this location went, it seemed, into a mad orgy of self-destruction. The bomb itself was accompanied by no blinding lights nor outward bluster of power. The destructive forces were of a more invisible nature. And thus the illusion that the buildings had entered into some fantastic race to lose form and become, with all possible speed, great ugly piles of rubble.

All human beings within range of the bomb's effectiveness turned instantly into small piles of charred dust. In the wider perimeters of destruction, they became smears of animal fat, stains on the chairs they sat in or the floors upon which they stood. Here was annihilation in its most exquisite and terrible form. As satisfactory a proof of precise scientific thinking as could be imagined.

The man driving Brian's cab had just pulled up for a stop light at Irving Park Boulevard when the bomb struck. He was a person of sharp perceptions and quick reactions. He slid from behind the wheel, said, "This is it, brother, so long," and vanished from sight.

Brian reacted somewhat differently. It was an explosion of some sort, obviously, but not the bomb. No nation in its right mind would dare open an atomic war. It was sheer suicide. Then a wave of power, like wind without sound, spun the cab sidewise and tipped it on its side.

Sure, it was idiotic to start an atomic war, but what if the other side figured they could win? They couldn't, of course, but they had a right to their own opinions on the matter. Brian wondered if after all the talk of no more wars—a perfect balance of power—those congenital idiots had had the nerve—

The cab went up on its nose, spun around and crashed down again. There was a smothered scream, a death rattle. Someone hadn't been able to get out of the way.

BRIAN'S helmet had gotten wedged down over his face. Cursing, he pried it loose, found the right rear door of the smashed cab swinging open. He rolled out into the street. He looked groggily about him.

While telling himself, on the verge of panic, that he couldn't possibly get to his feet in that stifling coat of mail, Brian struggled erect and found support against a light pole. His visor banged down. He pushed it up and watched the panic ebb and surge about him. Here, on the outermost perimeter of the deadly circle, the destruction was far from absolute. True, the dead lay in heaps all about, but their physical forms were distorted rather than destroyed. They were not grease spots but mangled human beings.

Others, still alive physically, had died within and now ran blindly. Some screamed—others choked on silence. A girl with a stiff, beautiful face, carrying her hat and half a dress in her hands, walked in a straight line bisected by Brian's ruined cab. She came to the cab, climbed in without hesitation and closed the door. An old man with quivering lips approached along the sidewalk. He stopped suddenly, sat down on the curb, and carefully tied his shoe. Then he got up and moved on.

Brian, not yet a victim of shock, saw the ten-story building directly across the street. That of course was the sensible place to go. All such buildings had been designated in saner days as havens of refuge. As he turned, a child, mute with terror, found the leg of his armor. Wrapping her arms

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about it, the tyke buried her face against its hard surface and sobbed.

Brian reached down and lifted her up. She clung to him, not objecting. He stepped off the curb, found he could move in his absurd getup, and started toward the dubious safety of the building.

But a manhole cover had been jarred from its place on the pavement. Brian did not see the opening. As he shot below the level of the street—still holding the child—he saw the tall building twist and writhe as though it were endeavoring to lay destructive hands upon its own throat. The world above and below him seemed to split open. He went down—down—down. And before oblivion, there was no thought in his mind.

* * *

NONA WAS young, lithe, and swift as the wind. Beautiful she was and desirable, but so sure of her speed that she tossed her sleek head at warnings of the pols. No pol could ever come within reaching distance of Nona. And no pols would ever be able to trap her in a place from which she could not flee.

Thus it was that when her tribe camped near the forbidden ruins, she slipped away as soon as she could—in spite of warnings from the leaders—to wander through the broken rubble and find the fragments of strange and wonderful things in that dead, silent, broken world.

Since earliest childhood, Nona had heard and remembered the legends and tales of how the great ruins came to be. It was said that there were many rubble piles. To the north and the south and particularly to the east of the Misip River, there were supposed to be dozens of ruins, some even greater than this one lying silent and mysterious beside the Mishi Lake. The tales of ancient times told by the leaders were given the greatest belief because the leaders always spoke the truth—or it was customary to believe they spoke the truth.

The leaders said that once the ruins had been cities made up of tall dwellings carved of stone; that people—very stupid people—lived in the stone dwellings and did not have to hunt meat nor sew skins against the cold winter because the gods provided for these people and gave them food in abundance and the stone dwellings were warm in winter.

But, the leaders claimed, something happened many hundreds of years in the past. The earth shook and all the cities fell down into ruins because the gods grew tired of supporting the ignorant people who could not hunt meat nor tan skins for clothing. All the people died, or at least most of them. Those who survived fled from the ruined cities and went into the hills. And for years and years afterwards the cities were places of death. Brave and daring men who had gone into the ruins either did not come out or reappeared with terrible sores and disfigurements from which they eventually died.

So for many generations the cities were shunned until, finally, other brave men went exploring them and returned unharmed. Still others followed suit, but the great ruins always remained more or less forbidden areas, with only the bravest leaders bringing their tribes anywhere near them. Eventually certain wily leaders discovered the ruins could be used as hiding places when the pols came to the tribes for taxus. But this ruse was discovered and the tribes punished. So now the taxus were grudgingly rendered the pols for delivery to the aryans—food and skins, and once in a while an able-

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bodied young man, or a comely female if the pols were able to find a beautiful one under the disguises and deceits practiced by the tribes.

The pols were of course the agents of the aryans but it was well known among the tribes that the pols were rascally, dishonest beings who would steal a comely female for their own purposes if they caught her beyond the help of her tribe.

But Nona had no fear of them. She had seen them come to the leaders of the tribe for taxus and had only contempt for their bald heads and bellies fat from easy living.

SO NOW she strolled in bemused wonder among the forbidden ruins beside Mishi Lake. Strange indeed were its mysteries and its bleak, brooding silence. Many its perplexing secrets.

There was the strange, clear, hard stuff over which Nona pondered with furrowed brow. It was of irregular shape and had sharp edges. It had to be handled carefully to keep from cutting the skin and drawing blood. But if held just right, it threw back an entrancing reflection; the same as one saw by looking into still water. And there were the strange fragile pieces of soft skin, good for nothing conceivable, upon which appeared the letters taught the tribe by the leaders. These, to Nona, were the most intriguing of the mysteries.

Digging carefully, she uncovered one—an irregular piece of skin so fragile she knew it would shatter at the touch of a finger. Twisting her head, she carefully spelled out the faint letters: "C—cago T-eat-r." And in smaller letters: "-artin and Lew-s, h-ld ov—-by pop— d-man-."

Nona wondered what it meant. After a second study of the skin, she touched it with her finger and saw it shatter into dust. She laughed. Then laughter answered her and she whirled.

Three pols stood there, grinning. One of them said, "Didn't I tell you this was good hunting grounds since that tribe camped near here? Grab her."

One of the pols reached out but Nona twisted downward, and slipped between his legs. The pol lost his balance and fell to the ground, thus retarding the other two until Nona was out into the open.

Frightened to the core, she ran blindly northward. Beyond danger it had been easy to visualize escape from the clumsy pols if the need for escape ever arose. The time for escape had come, and she found the pols not nearly so slow and clumsy as she had thought them to be.

They came swiftly after her, one of them calling, "Don't let her get away. She's a nice one and we might have trouble with her tribe if she gets back to them."

The fleetest of the pols was coming closer and Nona realized she was not his equal in a straightaway run. Like a terrorized rabbit, she veered to the right and disappeared behind a pile of rubble. Here was a temporary hiding place, but the pols were already circling in to cut off her retreat.

With an agility born of desperation, Nona went five feet up a sheer wall to find a foothold for a new takeoff. With the curses of the pols to spur her on, she crossed what was apparently a long since dried-up river bed and continued northward.

She ran for a long time and, from all appearances, finally outdistanced the pols. Glancing fearfully behind, she allowed her pace to slacken until she felt it safe to pause for rest.

And she needed rest. She had come several miles and even her superb wind and stamina had been strained.

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But she was allowed only a scant time for recuperation. The pols had not been shaken off. Again they hove in sight, voicing cries of triumph.

With renewed desperation, Nona turned and found a wall of rubble blocking her path. She secured a foothold and began to climb. Now the pols were at the base of the wall and were also climbing. Nona reached the top, snatched up a loose rock and hurled it down at her tormentors. It missed them but something else set them into a frenzied scramble for escape. Their combined weight on the rubble wall had upset its delicate balance. They hurled themselves to the left and narrowly escaped a landslide that would have destroyed them.

THE TUMBLING rock and debris were a near thing also for the terrified Nona. When all seemed hopeless, she gauged the span to a distant boulder, tightened her smooth muscles and jumped. She didn't make it, but fell downward in the opening left by the shifting wall. Down onto soft earth in front of a newly uncovered opening that was her last hope.

The pols reacted with joy as she ran into the semi-darkness of what was evidently a rough tunnel leading downward at a forty-five degree angle.

It lead straight to a dead end. There, hard against a new wall, Nona turned to face her captors. Whimpering, she sank down upon a mound of metal. She covered her face with her hands and waited in sick dread. The pols came forward at their leisure now, entirely sure of their prize.

But as they reached forth to take her, the mound beneath Nona stirred. The girl lost her balance and fell to the side. The metal kept on rising. Frozen with wonder, the pols stared in silence as the dirt-covered metal took on form; became the rough shape of a man with a strange mask for a head, with solid metal for arms, legs and torso.

The weird figure arose to its full height and the metal of its body creaked and snapped as it raised threatening arms.

An angry voice snarled, "Goddam visor—" This broke the spell and sent the pols scrabbling up the passageway toward the open areas where a man could run and save his life. The three of them achieved level ground and left that area in terror.

Nona stared at the weird figure. Under normal circumstances she would also have been terrified. But terror is a comparative thing. She had been saved from a fate spoken of in whispers around the campfires. A feeling of warmth and relief flooded her being and it was difficult to fear the instrument of her salvation.

She lay where she had fallen, watching in silent awe as the arm of the figure reached up toward the mask, lifted the front of it away and exposed the upper face of a man.

At that moment the man's eyes fell upon the crouching girl. "Come on," he said. "Help me out of this thing. I've got to get to a telephone. Have to see if my wife is all right."

Nona did not move. She could see the top of a scowl through the opening in the mask and the man repeated his demands. "I said, help me out of this helmet!"

Whimpering, Nona got to her feet and came forward. She wanted to show her gratitude. She would have gladly kissed the metal feet of her savior. But that was not what he wanted. It was something about the head with which he wanted help and Nona wished she understood.

The metal man stopped now as his eyes centered on her with clarity. He saw the brief skin garment covering

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her from breast to hips, the bare tanned skin, the jet-black hair and red lips. "Were you on your way to the masquerade too?"

"I—I am miserable. I don't understand you."

"Don't blame you for being miserable. But you're alive and safe. That's the main thing. I wonder if all the telephone wires are down."

"Telephone wires?"

The half-face looked down at the girl with pity. "Poor kid. Suffering from shock. But everything's going to be all right. Wait 'til we get our licks in. After we're through wrecking them, that outfit won't have a bomb left."

"A bomb?"

"Yes, a bomb. What's your name? Mine is Brian Courtney."

"My name is Nona. I belong to Mark's tribe. I owe you much for chasing away the pols."

Brian stared at her in silence for a moment. "You really got shaken up didn't you? Come on, we'll go find a Red Cross station. They've probably got them set up by now."

NONA CAME forward timidly and Brian started up the incline. He stopped and turned to grin at her. "Just remembered. I've got to wear this tin suit for a while. Haven't got anything on under it. Left my clothes in the cab."

He pushed on up the incline with Nona following in wide-eyed silence. As they came up out of the tunnel her caution took the upper hand. She touched the metal arm of this newly resurrected creature and said, "We'd better be careful. The pols might still be around."

Brian frowned. "What's the matter with you, kid? Take it easy." He reached forth and laid a gauntleted hand gently upon her shoulder. "You must be a dancer or a singer in one of the Clark Street clubs. Me—I was headed for a masquerade party in Evanston. Guess we're both lucky to be alive."

He saw the bewilderment in Nona's face, misinterpreted it, and strove to smile encouragingly. He moved on up the incline until they reached open, rubble-strewn ground. He came slowly to a halt and stood transfixed as complete bafflement took hold of him. He turned slowly in a circle absorbing the picture of destruction and desolation. When he spoke it was with the dawning of a new and terrible wonder.

"I don't— I don't get it. I don't understand at all. What kind of bombs did they use? Where are the people? I don't see anybody."

"This is the forbidden ruin—Brian. There are no people here. Nobody ever comes here except once in a while to look around—like me."

A great weakness suddenly ate into Brian's flesh. A dizziness that caused him to reach out for support. Nona was there to help. "Are you all right? Do you feel sick?"

Brian ignored her. He stood searching his numbed mind. "There was the cab. A girl got into it. A man stopped to tie his shoe. There was a child. I picked the child up." He turned in sudden decision, pushed Nona away, and started back down the tunnel. Nona, deeply uncertain, let him proceed alone.

At the bottom of the incline, back at the spot from which he had arisen, Brian peered about in the semi-gloom. "Baby! Little girl! Are you here? Are you all right? Answer me! Hey! Is anybody here?"

Only his echo answered and Brian went to his knees to dig with panic in the earth. His search was fruitful and he raised up two small brown bones. They were most fragile—ready to crumble into dust—but the form of

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them was still there to tell a mute and pitiful story.

Brian laid the bones down gently and got to his feet. Unbidden, his throat clotted suddenly with a dry, retching sob. The sob turned into muttered words. "Dead and dry and gone. Bones in a cave. Dry bones and—nothing."

The words stopped like the last driblets of water coming from an exhausted well. Brian turned and climbed out of the cave. He saw the girl standing where she had stood before. He walked to her and stared blankly into her face.

"There are people—where you belong? Where you are going?"

"Yes. My tribe. The leaders and the people."

"Take me there. Take me there quickly. I don't want to go stark raving mad in a suit of armor."

MARK HAD a long equine face, half obscured by a black beard. His eyes were rock-gray and yet not hard or piercing. His entire mien could be described, Brian thought, as gentle, philosophical, sad.

His dwelling place was a rectangular, low-ceilinged structure consisting of a wooden frame covered with partially cured animal pelts. He was in his latter years, as was also his wife, Carmen, who sat in the background and worked patiently upon a small pelt.

Mark sat crosslegged, facing Brian over a glowing, smokeless fire in which the embers snapped and crackled. "It is a very strange story," he said. "But your presence here is proof of something. We can only discuss it sanely and try to draw some conclusions."

Brian's beardless face was pale and drawn. He had removed the suit of mail and sat wrapped in a large skin. "Suspended animation," he said and shuddered. "It's something you talk about at parties maybe, and the ones who really believe in it are classed as crackpots. It's an unhealthy subject. Normal, wholesome people make jokes about it."

Mark shrugged. "I am in a peculiar position in this matter. You might call me the normal, wholesome person. But I am not inclined to make jokes. Either you are some kind of fraud or this is an amazing affair."

"Do you think I'm a fraud?"

Mark regarded Brian soberly. "I'll answer by turning your question back at you. Do *you* think you are a fraud?"

Brian pondered in turn. "Not a deliberate one—that I assure you. As to my being a victim of illusions—I don't know. Have you ever seen me before? Or anyone like me?"

"No."

"You say there are many such tribes as yours in the country. Do you think I could belong to one of them? Possibly some kind of shock has turned me completely around. Maybe all the background I remember so clearly—"

Mark broke in with a slow shaking of the head; a shaking which did not indicate disbelief of the theory so much as puzzlement. "Regardless, it is a remarkable thing—this arrival of yours. The background you mention—your story of that other ancient world is fantastic, yet so logical. It explains many things we leaders have dimly sensed for hundreds of years."

"So far as I am concerned it is all true; or at least I sincerely believe it to be true. And it gains conviction in my mind from the fact that I know nothing of your world, while this one of the past is so real as to be a part of me."

Mark came erect in one smooth motion. "There are some tests we

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haven't made yet. They might throw a little more light on the affair." Mark crossed the dwelling and opened a crude chest in a far corner. He returned to place several objects on the floor by the fire. "These are a number of useless curiosities I have gathered together during my lifetime. Most of them came from the various ruins around the country." Mark smiled. "In my younger years I was something of an adventurer. I went into many places that are usually shunned."

MARK TOOK up one of the objects and handed it to Brian. "Can you tell me whether or not this ever had a use?"

Brian turned the ancient corroded piece of metal in his hands. He smiled also, and there was a certain nostalgia in his manner. "It was called a safety razor," he said. "Men shaved with them."

"Shaved? I don't understand."

"In the world I knew, beards were not commonly seen. Once a day, sometimes oftener, men shaved the whiskers from their faces with this instrument. Women also used it to shave the hair off their legs."

Mark's eyes widened. "Were the women hairy?"

"Not really. But fashion demanded that no down whatever appear on women's legs. It was silly of course." Brian held forth the razor. "This is two pieces of metal fused together by rust. The razor itself and the blade. You twisted this end and two flanges opened at the other. You laid the blade under these flanges and tightened them into place."

"And this?"

"It is the beater from a food mixer. It was attached to an electrically driven motor and revolved in conjunction with another beater. It mixed salad dressings, eggs, all manner of foods."

"Electrically driven. Can you explain that?"

"Electricity is a force that can be created and harnessed inside motors to furnish power."

"Could you create and harness electricity?"

"I don't know. I think I could make a simple working model of a dynamo. There are certain materials needed."

Mark's interest had now centered upon the suit of mail lying beside Brian. He frowned. "You were wearing that metal suit, yet you tell me such suits weren't commonly used in your time."

"That's true. I was en route to a costume party when the bomb fell. That was a party where the guests came in unusual clothing."

"Why did they come in unusual clothing?"

"Because—well, because it was considered fun—recreation."

"Was it also recreation to shave and mix food?"

"No. Those were accepted practices of the times."

"I see."

"No, you don't see at all."

Mark smiled. "Let's say that I see enough to have a great respect for you—and to almost believe you lived two thousand years ago—"

"Two thousand years!"

Mark indulged in his characteristic shrug. "You say the bomb fell in 1959. Our records indicate this to be the year 2170."

Shock was apparent on Brian's face. So much so that the gentle Mark said, "Of course, our records could be wrong. This may not be the year 2170 at all."

Mark's reply had not yet formed when a cry of alarm was heard from somewhere in the encampment. Brian, his eyes on Mark, heard the words. "Pols! Taxus!" shouted in tones of fear.

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But this was not so amazing as the swift change in Mark himself. He was transformed in a flash from a dignified, self-possessed individual to a craven, fear-stricken, miserable old man. The light of reason died in his gray eyes to give place to the stricken look of a condemned criminal.

UTTERLY confounded by the metamorphosis, Brian sat unmoving as Mark sprang to his feet. The leader turned to his wife. "The women?"

"They should have time," she returned. "I will go and help."

Mark returned his attention to Brian. "You had better hide. There—under that pile of skins. I don't think they will find you. And I'll cover the metal suit."

Motivated mainly by bewilderment, Brian allowed himself to be hidden under a heap of odorous animal skins. Through a rift in the pile, he saw Mark throw more skins over the suit of armor and then leave the dwelling.

Left alone, Brian listened for a while to the sounds of excitement out in the encampment. People rushed here and there, apparently bent upon desperate preparations for a dread event.

After a time the sounds of activity diminished. Overcome with curiosity, Brian twisted around in his hiding place until he lay close to the hide wall of the dwelling. He separated two of the skins at a rude seam until he could look out into the encampment. It was a strange sight indeed. As perfect a picture of dejection, poverty, utter hopelessness as could be imagined.

A comparatively small number of people were in sight, but each one of them added something to the bleak whole. They sat crosslegged in front of their dwellings with arms tightly folded, cowering down in the skin garments and with shawls of skin drawn over their heads. All that was needed, Brian thought, was the wailing of mournful reeds to make this scene completely heart-rending. But there was no sound and, he concluded, the dead, empty silence was almost as effective.

The scene remained static for some minutes. Then came the sound of approaching footsteps and a small cavalcade marched into the square around which the dwellings had been erected.

This cavalcade centered around three horses, one of which was loaded with odd equipment Brian could not identify. There were five men in the party and they differed to a great degree from the members of Mark's tribe. They were short of stature and given to loose, ill-kept flesh. They were bearded but the heads of three of them were completely bald—a condition not found among the males of the tribe.

And there was an arrogance about them that bespoke vested and abused power. They came directly to Mark's tent and looked down with contempt at the seated leader. A pompous little butterball of a man was the spokesman for the group. He pushed contemptuously at Mark with one foot. "Get up, old fool. We've come for the taxus."

Mark cowered miserably. "But you came such a short time ago. We are poor."

The fat man grinned with satisfaction. "And the taxus aren't all. We want one youth and one girl. Bring out your tribe. We will make our selections. Then we will collect the taxus."

The visible members of the tribe arose to obey and the keynote of the scene was complete and utter defeat, so stark and apparent as to make Brian's skin crawl. No word was spoken by anyone save Mark, who was so bold as to ask, "The youth and the

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girl—are they for the aryans?"

The fat man whirled upon him, aimed a vicious kick at the crouching leader. "Of course they are for the aryans. Do we collect for anyone else, you fool? Get up on your feet."

MARK GOT up painfully as Brian watched the square fill with members of the tribe. It was remindful to him of tales he'd read of the French Court of Miracles—that place in old Paris where the beggars and cutthroats of the city feigned every disease and disfigurement known to man. The young females of the tribe plodded out to stand in a line. There were filthy, slack-lipped, dull eyed. They limped and walked in various twisted postures indicating all manner of physical impairment.

Came also the youths to make as sorry a spectacle as the females. They formed a line and stood patiently waiting, like animals in a slaughter pen.

The pols walked up and down, surveying the specimens with disgust and contempt. But they were not completely deceived, as shown by the fat spokesman's words, "You think you're very clever, don't you? You think all this dirt fools us. You think we don't know about throwing arms out of joint and letting lips hang slack. You!"

He jerked a girl from the line, took her by the shoulders and shook her violently. When he was through, the girl's physical deformities had vanished in a cloud of confusion. He drew her matted hair back tight over her well-shaped head, wiped a little of the dirt from her face with the palm of his hand and asked, "What's your name, girl?"

She did not reply, but after a sharp slap on the cheek, cried, "I am Nona. Please! I don't want to go to the aryans!"

The pol stepped back and surveyed her critically. "You'll do. With the dirt off, you will be very pretty." He took what appeared to be a metal disc from his pocket and went over and handed it to Mark. "There is your receipt," he said. "And now for the youth."

But there was disruption of the preconceived routine at this point when one of the youths quitted the line and rushed toward Nona. In a frenzy of desperation rather than a gesture of defiance, he hurled a nearby pol to the ground and took Nona in his arms. "You can't! You can't take her! Take one of the others, but not her! Please."

The upset pol got to his feet. He was grinning as he brushed away the dust. The fat spokesman was also grinning as he took a metal instrument from his pocket and pointed it at the youth. "Resistance, eh? You know the penalty for laying hands on a pol. It's about time another example was given to be remembered. Get the box ready."

A wailing of despair went up from the combined throats of the tribe, and the youth's resistance melted like candle wax. He slumped into a picture of utter dejection as the pols began unloading what looked to Brian to be the walls of a telephone booth from the pack horse.

Swiftly they set the walls together until they had constructed a booth about six feet in height with room inside to accomodate comfortably a single person. Dead silence had now fallen upon the tribe. They stared at the harmless looking booth as though it were some tool of evil incarnate.

At this point, Brian's attention was distracted by a movement inside the dwelling. The skins under which he lay hidden were being lifted away and he turned to look into the face of Carmen, Mark's quiet, self-effacing wife. But she was not self-effacing now.

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Mixed with the terror in her face, was the first spark of defiance Brian had seen in this strange world. Faint and hardly identifiable it was true—but still defiance.

"Can't you help us? Can't you do something? Tardy is my nephew. My sister's boy. They are going to kill him! Can't you do something?"

THE WOMAN'S words jarred Brian from his strangely lethargic spell. He had been lying there under the skins, watching the stark events with a feeling of disembodiment. His sympathies had been, of course, with the tribe, but in a rather detached form; as though he were merely a spectator watching strange players go through the motions of a grotesque comedy.

It was with a sense of relief that he reverted to reality and became a part of this world. Drawing the animal skin about him, he stepped out of the dwelling and confronted the people in the square.

His clean-shaven face set him apart from the members of the tribe. The fat pol registered quick surprise upon sight of him and immediately turned the metal object in his hand to bear upon Brian.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"That's not important. What has this boy done? Why are you going to kill him?"

"More defiance!" the pol snarled. "We'll have a double execution here. One that will be long remembered."

Brian, while realizing the stark reality of all this so far as the tribe of Mark was concerned, still found himself unable to take it seriously. It was too bizarre for belief. The terror of the tribe, while obviously genuine, was so poorly motivated as to seem silly to Brian.

He advanced toward the pol, his eyes on the weapon held by the man. He stopped with the metal instrument an inch from his chest. "What are you going to do with that thing?"

"What am I going to do with it? You fool! Don't you know what it is?"

"Certainly. It's an old .45 automatic pistol. I'll bet it hasn't been fired in a hundred years. The thing's almost rusted out. Go ahead. Shoot me with it!"

The pol looked down at the gun with wonder and complete consternation. His frowning bewilderment deepened as he raised his eyes to Brian's face.

"I asked—who are you?"

"Aren't you going to give this boy a fair trial? That is, if you've really got the authority you seem to take for granted."

The pol's eyes widened, then narrowed as he waved what was evidently a command at the pols who held the youth in their grip. Immediately, they pushed him into the booth and, while a thin wail went up from the tribesmen, they slammed the door.

The pol eyed Brian with a certain triumph now. "And you're next. We'll smash this defiance if we have to kill every member of the tribe!"

"What are you doing? Smothering him to death? Open that door!"

The pol grinned. "We'll open it."

The executioners evidently took this also as an order. They drew back the door of the booth and Brian stood stunned with surprise as the limp body of the youth slumped out onto the ground.

Brian became interested in the booth to the exclusion of all else. It was beyond credence that the boy could have suffered injury. Or was it? Brian's robe dropped to the ground as he ran to kneel by the still form. Swiftly, he searched for a pulse. There was none. He laid his ear on the still chest. No heart beat.

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BRIAN GOT to his feet and stepped toward the booth. It had been set up on the bare ground with no outward connections of any kind. It was a crude affair but Brian discovered, upon coming closer, that it was lined with a dull metal resembling lead. Perhaps it was lead. He put a hand inside to investigate further.

This could have been a signal for a new wailing from the members of the tribe; also for the concerted lunge of two pols who hit Brian with extended arms and knocked him into the booth. A third pol slammed the door and Brian found himself trapped in close darkness.

But any lethal capacities of the booth escaped him. There was enough space to breathe for quite some time, even though the booth was air-tight which, Brian decided, it certainly was not. He ran his hands over the smooth metal surface while from outside came the sad, discouraged monotone singing of the tribesman.

Brian pondered the situation. Had the youth died of fright? It seemed the only explanation; yet what was there about this booth to inspire such fear?

Still engrossed in ferreting out any possible deadly functioning of the box, Brian was interrupted by the opening of the door. And sight of the pols gathered around outside gave Brian the impression that the booth was now supposed to have done its deadly work. He stepped forth into the open square.

Immediately the wailing stopped. The members of the tribe gaped at Brian as though he were something beyond comprehension.

The pols also were at a loss. They duplicated the astounded gaze of the tribesmen and then looked, as blankly, at each other. No one seemed to have anything to say.

But Brian had not forgotten the undignified shove. Scowling, he advanced on the fat spokesman of the pols. "I don't like to be pushed, friend," he said, and slammed a fist against the pol's fleshy jaw.

The pol went down. Snarling, he brought up the ancient .45. Brian was not particularly frightened by the weapon. The rust and corrosion caking its surface indicated it could not possibly be fired. But even a long chance was pointless so Brian kicked it out of the pol's hand.

At this moment there was a cry in front of Mark's dwelling. Brian looked up to see that one of the pols had been inside and was now running toward the group by the mysterious booth. "The thing from the ruins they told us about! The metal man! It's in that house! Run! Run!"

The pols ran. Like scared cattle they stampeded across the square and into the rocky country beyond. Brian laughed. Mark had come toward the booth. Brian turned to him. "I don't know what that was all about but I don't think they'll bother you any more."

But the fear in Mark's face had not abated one whit. "You have done us a terrible disservice," he said. "You have defied the pols. Only misfortune for the tribe can result."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Brian muttered.

THE TWO shawled women, walking against the last of the twilight on the horizon, were, to Brian, a symbol of burdened womanhood from all ages past. Their somber figures fit perfectly into the vast melancholy of this world.

They came silently and knelt before the rock upon which he sat. "I have come to ask you to return," Carmen said.

Brian turned his eyes to the face of Nona. It had changed. He had seen it first filled with terror there in the

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cave. For a time, before the coming of the pols, in it was mirrored pert interest and a certain awe when the large dark eyes centered upon him. Now it seemed to have entered into another period of beauty—a beauty matured by suffering, yet nonetheless dazzling.

"Did he mean a great deal to you?"

"Tardy?"

"Yes. The boy who died."

"Not in the way you mean. He was good. I think he loved me. He must have loved me to do what he did."

"Is it a great indication of valor in the tribe to stand up for a loved one?"

"I—I don't understand."

"Never mind."

"I have talked with Mark," Carmen said. "He will permit you to return. I have convinced him you are an exceptional person; that you will be good for the tribe."

"He told me my presence would only endanger the tribe."

"I don't think he believes that. He has done everything possible to atone for the defiance."

"He has—*atoned*?"

"Yes. He packed the pol's death house and also a generous supply of skins for taxus on the horses and took them several miles in the direction the pols ran. The pols will come back after them. He wanted to send Nona with the horses, but I talked him out of it."

"Frankly, that's hard to believe. Tell me, what's the basis for this psychopathic fear of the pols?"

"I don't understand you."

"Why are you afraid of them?"

The somber woman searched her mind for an answer. "We have always feared the pols."

"But why? They appear to be stupid little men. They strike me as somewhat ridiculous."

The woman looked at the girl, then back at Brian. "They have power."

"What power? A rusty .45 pistol that couldn't possibly fire a shot?"

"We never before knew what it was, but we feared it."

"How long have you feared it?"

"Since—beyond memory."

"You mean your tribe has been in continual terror of a weapon that was never used?"

"They have the death house. You saw it work."

"I also saw a band of able-bodied men allow one of their number to be put inside this death house. I don't know how it killed the boy but that's beside the point."

It appeared the woman had never before been called upon to formulate reasons for the tribe's conduct. Thus she made a sorry job of it now. "We have always recognized the authority of the pols."

Brian saw questions in this direction were a waste of time. "If I am to go back with your tribe, there are things I must know."

"We will tell you anything we can."

"I'm sure you will. First, tell me, in so many words—whence does the authority of the pols come?"

"From the aryans."

"And who are the aryans?"

AS BRIAN asked his questions, his eyes remained upon the hauntingly beautiful face of Nona. Even as Carmen answered him, a portion of Brian's mind was being influenced by the girl. Her presence generated within him a bitterness, a sadness as he remembered the other, brighter world he had come from. He remembered the gay, sparkling Jennifer. In his loneliness her sharpness of tongue, her continual driving, were forgotten—overshadowed by the recollection of her soft red lips, her yielding body and even the long-gone fragrance of her perfume.

"Who are the aryans?"

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"They live in the great building to the south."

"Is that all you know about them?"

"No one knows anything about the aryans. No one has ever seen one."

"Then how do you know they exist?"

"Everyone knows they exist. It is for the aryans that the pols collect the taxus. The aryans stay in the great building and render us a service."

"What service?"

"We do not know, but it is a great service, otherwise we would not have to give them the taxus and sometimes our sons and daughters."

Brian turned from Nona to center his entire attention upon Carmen. "Madam, I'm taking it for granted you speak with complete candor and seriousness because I can see no reason why you should do otherwise."

"I am telling you the truth."

"In that case you will pardon my frankness, but this is the damndest situation I've ever come upon. It becomes believable mainly because such a cockeyed proposition would be far beyond the imagination of a genius and as yet I've found no geniuses among you."

"I understand little of what you say, but I am glad you believe me."

Brian sighed. "Tell me this: If no member of the tribes has ever seen an aryan, and yet they are believed to exist—"

"Oh, but they do exist."

"—are believed to exist in the great building you mention, why don't the leaders go to the building and visit them?"

"We are not allowed anywhere near the building."

"How do you know if you never tried to go there?"

"Long ago some brave tribe leaders did try. But the giants stopped them."

"The giants? Who are they?"

"We don't know."

"But great heavens, woman! You must know something about them!"

"Just that they are huge. Their feet are on the ground, but their heads are high in the sky. When any of the tribes go near the great building, the giants rise up with their weapons and the tribes are driven away."

"I wonder."

"What do you wonder?"

"Whether they are driven away or whether they run like the cravens they seem to be at sight of these creatures —whatever they are."

"The giants defend the great building. We are not supposed to go near it."

"The pols must go there to deliver the taxus to the aryans."

"I suppose they do, but that is not our affair. We only give the pols the taxus when they come for them."

"Another thing—the girls and young men you deliver into the hands of the pols. Do you ever see them again?"

"No."

"Aren't you curious as to what happens to them?"

"It is not our place to wonder."

"How do you know the pols don't keep them for themselves?"

"The pols sometimes try to steal our girls if they wander away from the tribe. But when they come to take them for the aryans, they give our leader a receipt."

"That bit of metal the pol handed Mark?"

"Yes. That is a receipt from the aryans."

"And in your mind it guarantees ultimate delivery?"

"Of course."

"How do you know?"

"That has always been known."

BRIAN SIGHED. No matter what circuitous route he took, he came always to that frustrating stone wall. Age-old custom. He recollected a

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truism of an ancient historical upstart, Adolf Hitler, who had based his audacious forays upon the belief that, if the people were told a lie often enough, that lie became truth. The situation Brian found in this sad and sorry world seemed a fantastic extension of the mad Teuton's theory. He pondered while the two women sat in submissive silence. He thought of the repetitive principle and wondered if it applied in this case. If so, who had started the lies, the deceits, the grotesque falsehoods under which these people existed? There was a connection, he decided, but the key flaw in the picture, the basic and tragic weakness, eluded him. And somehow he felt it should not elude him. Every civilization, every form of human society from the beginning of time, has been based upon apparent needs and instincts. And there was something here—not a need, not an instinct, but a tyrannical thread that ran crimson through the pattern of this strange world. Somehow, Brian felt, it was within the people themselves rather than any outside force or influence.

I should be able to define it, he told himself. It is a germ and I should have the ability to isolate it and put it on a slide.

But he could not and after a time he said to Carmen. "I will go back to the encampment. But later. You go on ahead. I will stay here a while with Nona."

Carmen neither voiced nor indicated any objection. She got to her feet. "I am very glad," she said. "I will tell Mark you are coming." With that she walked silently away into the night.

Brian could now make out but faintly the highlights on Nona's face. "Come closer," he said.

Nona got up and moved forward the two paces necessary to kneel at Brian's feet. He took her hand in his, held it in a somewhat vague and bemused manner.

"Nona, if I kissed you, what would you do?"

"I—I don't understand you."

"Would you resist—slap my face—bite me?"

"No. I wouldn't do anything."

"Would you kiss me back?"

"If you asked me to."

"Let's go a little further. Suppose I took you in my arms and held you very close. Would you resist?"

"No."

"Would you like me to hold you close?"

"I don't know. I think maybe I would."

"Let's go as far as we can. Suppose I did—what a man ultimately does with the woman he loves?"

"Do you mean we would have a child?"

"Yes. Would you resist me?"

"No."

Brian's sigh was one of weariness. He got up and drew Nona erect. "I was just wondering," he said. "Come on, let's go back to the encampment." They walked in silence, probably because Brian was too depressed to speak. He'd hoped to find some clue in his questioning of Nona. He had found none. He had merely discovered he could have the girl if he wanted her. And that didn't seem very important.

BRIAN ASKED, "Do you intend to spend the rest of your life groveling at the feet of your fears? Haven't you any desire for betterment? Aren't you ashamed to accept the title of leader?"

Mark stared lifelessly into the fire before which he sat. Other fires glowed in the enclosure and around each crouched group of silent people—huddled and still as though waiting with infinite patience for time to pass.

"You don't understand," Mark said listlessly.

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"I wish you'd stop saying that. There is no mystery here. Only a lot of empty people, laziness, cowardice, and superstition."

Mark said nothing. He hunched deeper into his skins and stared into the fire.

"I've insulted you," Brian said. "Why don't you get up and hit me?"

"Hit you? That would be foolish. Why should I?"

"If you don't know, I'm afraid I can't explain it."

"Let's talk about you. Who you are and how you got here. If you truly lived two thousand years ago, do you think the suit of mail was instrumental in preserving you?"

Brian felt sudden pity for the old man. He was so obvious. Like a shamed and helpless child trying to fend off ridicule by changing the subject.

"I don't know. I'm here—that's what counts. The mechanics aren't very important to me."

"Are you going to stay with the tribe?"

"I don't know."

"If you do stay here, you must—ah, conform, Brian. You really must. We cannot chance trouble with the pols. That might lead to disfavor with the aryans."

"What would the aryans do in that case?"

"I don't know. We have never incurred their wrath."

Brian leaned closer to the slim, blanketed figure. "Suppose I agreed to lead an expedition to the great building and call upon the aryans. Would any of your tribe go with me?"

"It would be useless. The giants guard the great building."

"I asked you a question. Would they go with me?"

"No."

"Would you forbid them to go?"

"No. It wouldn't be necessary." Mark smiled briefly as his eye ran over the crouching figures in the square. "They are content to be as they are. To live, to hunt—"

"To cringe in fear every waking moment. To serve as cattle for a handful of arrogant rascals!"

"They are happy," Mark said stubbornly.

"Maybe they are, but not I. Maybe I don't belong in this world of yours, Mark. But as long as I'm here, there are things I must know. I'm going to the great building."

Mark eyed Brian with genuine concern. "You don't believe me, do you? You don't think there are any giants. Possible you don't even believe in the existence of the aryans."

"I don't believe or disbelieve anything. I doubt the existence of the giants very much because I've never seen one. But I'm not going to sit here wondering."

Mark shrugged. "If you are set on it, I wouldn't try to stop you."

"More than that—you're glad to have me go, aren't you?"

"Yes, I think so. As long as you are with us, we won't be safe. Another incident with the pols— In fact even now they may be planning against us."

"Figuring the speed they went out of camp, I doubt if they've stopped running yet," Brian said drily.

"May I make a suggestion?"

"Certainly."

"The pols dot the country from here to the great building. So long as they are deathly afraid of the armor, why don't you wear it?"

Brian suddenly warmed toward the old man. "Then you don't wish me ill?"

"Of course not. I like you, Brian. I only wish you were more tractable."

A sharp reply arose to Brian's lips. He stifled it and smiled at the old man.

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"I'll wear the armor," he said. "I'll go and put it on now."

"You aren't leaving immediately?"

"Why not? There is a moon now and I feel no need of sleep. I can travel by night and nap in the heat of the day."

"Be careful, Brian—of the pols."

Brian got to his feet. "And now how do I find this great building of the aryans?"

"If you travel by night," Mark said while considering the sky, "always keep that fat blue star directly to your right. In the daytime, ride across the path of the sun. You will find the giants waiting at the end of that road."

"You said *ride*."

"We will give you a horse. It is a long journey."

"Thank you."

"I WANT to go with you," Nona said.

Brian had pulled up his horse after it shied at a rising shadow. The shadow stepped forward and became Nona of the serious, beautiful face. "When you were getting ready to leave I came on ahead so as to be here when you rode by. I want to go with you."

"You'd better go back to the tribe, Nona. You'll be missed."

"No one cares much. I am an orphan. Maybe they won't even notice I'm gone."

"You have no one?" Brian regarded the girl. Somehow, her quiet, almost tragic, beauty symbolized the melancholy sadness and resignation that lay like a pall over this lost land.

"My mother and father died when I was ten. My father was put into the death box and my mother died soon afterwards. I was allowed to stay with the tribe. They were good but they don't really care much."

"I wonder if they care about anything?"

"I—I don't understand you."

"Never mind. But I don't think you want to go with me, Nona. I'll probably meet the giants. You're afraid of them, aren't you?"

"Not—not if you aren't."

He smiled without humor. "The first declaration of courage I've heard. But I'm afraid the trip would be too hard on you. And there might be trouble."

"I listened when you talked to Mark. You said, 'To cringe in fear every waking moment. To serve as cattle...' You refuse that fate for yourself. But you condemn me to it. Is that being fair?"

Brian considered while the fat blue star burned in the heavens above and the prairie grasses rustled in the night wind. "No, it isn't. Put your foot into the stirrup and climb up behind me."

With a soft cry of gratitude, Nona complied.

"Maybe we'll die," Brian said. "Maybe we'll be tortured. Maybe we'll fall prey to disease. But we won't cower like beasts whatever our fate."

He nudged the horse into a canter and was quickly brighter of mood. The dirge-like quality was gone from the song of the wind; the stars twinkled now, and there was nothing baleful about their thousand eyes. Brian wondered why this change. Then he found a reason. Nona. The grounds for her demand to ride with him had been the first declaration of spirit he had discovered since rising from two thousand years of dust and silence. This proved a spark still glowed in the dead hearts of these people.

From here he fell to wondering again about the true key to the situation. A people so supine and hopeless was not normal by any standards he knew. Was there somewhere a new norm which had escaped him? Hardly likely. Norms were created by evolution and the needs of the people themselves. Where in God's name had there

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ever been need of universal cowardice?

They rode on, Brian engrossed in his thoughts, and Mona content to ride silent behind him, her hand gripping for support the flanges of his armor.

The hours slipped by and dawn bloomed in the east to contest night's reign. The darkness fell back. It was morning.

THEY CAME at last to a crystal stream dancing over brown rocks. Brian dismounted and lifted Nona to the ground. It was a semi-rough country—rolling plain dotted here and there with scrub brush and rock clumps.

Brian unsaddled the horse and led it to the stream. "There is food in the saddle bags. Carmen prepared it for me."

They breakfasted on beans—fried crisp and dried. There were jerks of dried meat which were tough but palatable. After they had eaten their fill, Brian peeled off his armor. Stretching luxuriously, he frowned at the pile of metal. "It seems absurb, wearing that outfit."

"If the pols come—"

"Let's get some rest. You might try that large bush by the stream. It will provide shade. I'll tether the horse."

A short time later, he approached the bush to find Nona sound asleep. He was tired, his body ached, but still his blood arose at sight of her.

She had laid out her robe as a bed. The upper part of her fur garment—which was most of it—had been removed for use as a pillow. Her hair lay in unleashed glory about her head.

A sudden flood of elemental instinct came to do battle with Brian's reason. He took an unconscious step forward. Another and another until he was standing over her, pulses pounding in his head.

Nona stirred. She opened her eyes, smiled at him, turned on her side and closed her eyes, still smiling. Immediately her breasts were rising and falling in even, untroubled sleep.

"Hell," Brian breathed. "She trusts me. After all a man can't—" He turned away and found a soft grassy spot nearby. "Let's just say she isn't my type," he drowsed. "Lord, I'm tired!"

THE POLS came very quietly. They had been waiting and watching from beyond the swell of the prairie—a dozen of them—and they came on tiptoe, their fat faces aglow with craft and anticipation.

There was an animal trembling in the four assigned to overcome Nona. They stood around her, waiting, and making faint little noises in their throats at what lay before them.

The rest surrounded Brian, even while glancing with envy at the other group.

Brian, sleeping easily, awoke without effort. He was lying on his belly, one eye invisible from above. He opened that eye and counted the feet standing near him. He counted feet and a sense of exhilaration came over him. He felt like a man who had been trapped for a long time and was now being released. That was what it felt like; in reality it was from anticipation of physical battle. The fat legs of the pols presaged this battle and, whatever the odds, Brian would find glory and satisfaction in the combat.

He tried to lay a plan, but there was none in his mind—no room for a plan. Simply rise up and fight. But there was the point of striking now or waiting for a hostile move.

But the decision was not with Brian. At the moment a quick scream from Nona became the gage of battle. Brian snarled like a wounded wolf and

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rolled sidewise, hard against the bank of legs flanking his bed. He hit the legs even while gathering his balance and coming erect.

A quick glance revealed the now-naked Nona, fighting in the grip of four pols. They were holding her in a manner calculated to force compliance by sharp strain on the limbs; but a manner which enraged Brian and brought a red haze to his eyes.

Two heads came momentarily in close proximity and within reach of Brian's hands. His palms went out and slammed inward, bringing the heads into crunching contact. First blood spurted from the torn ear of a pol and now there was screaming. As a club came down upon his shoulder, Brian found the extended arm of some unfortunate. He twisted it in savage triumph, turned it, pulled it around with all his weight until it snapped at the shoulder, bringing forth a shriek of agony that echoed across the prairie. The pol went down and Brian aimed a kick squarely into his face. There was a crunching sound. The scream turned into the gurgle of a drowning man. A man drowning in his own blood. The pols fell back from Brian now but he quickly saw it was a tactical move, not a retreat. They planned a campaign of harrassment, like wolves striving to bring down a giant elk.

One of the pols hurled a rock that smashed against Brian's knee-cap, bringing him down. The pain was sharp, intense, but his mind was clear. He cowered in a crouch, simulating the fear that the pols took for granted in the tribesman. The three remaining pols closed in. As Brian tensed his muscles, he noted the other four had taken Nona out of sight behind the large bush. Her sobbing told him she still lived.

Why doesn't she fight? he asked himself in a frenzy of frustration. *Why doesn't she fight?* Then he was busy with his own private war.

ONE OF THE pols arced a club viciously downward. It skidded off Brian's shoulder as he grabbed the ankles of two pols and brought them to the ground. Rising, he jammed a knee savagely into a stomach, rupturing it and bringing forth another scream of agony. In a swift continuation of motion, he picked up a fist-sized rock and crushed the skull of the second prone pol.

That left only one. With a brittle grin, Brian came to his feet and lunged. He brought down the squealing pol. But, faced with only terror-stricken groveling, he released the man in disgust and ran toward the bush behind which Nona had been carried.

She lay sobbing but apparently unharmed and, over the near swell of the prairie, Brian saw the fleeing forms of her tormentors.

He bent over to nurse the painful bruise on his knee, studiously keeping his eyes off Nona the while. "They're gone," he said coldly. "You can get dressed now."

As Nona got up and went silently toward the place where she had slept, Brian cursed himself inwardly for his brusqueness. After all, she was only a girl. But somehow, he had become so disgusted with cringing and whining that he couldn't tolerate it even in Nona.

Later, he returned to the bush and found her dressed. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to be rough."

"It's all right." The girl hung her head and did not meet his eyes.

Suddenly, Brian reached down and tilted her chin upward until she was looking at him. "Nona. Haven't you learned something here—today?"

"What could I have learned?"

"That all the misery of your tribe—and all the tribes—comes from

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cowering before the pols. And today you saw what they really are. Cowards themselves. They came upon us while we slept, yet I killed four of them with my bare hands and the rest ran away. They aren't people to be afraid of, Nona. They're merely contemptible!"

Nona got up from where she had been sitting. She held his eyes. "I know, Brian. I'm beginning to feel the way you do. Maybe I don't act it, but I feel it."

Brian, deeply contrite, took her in his arms. "I was rotten, Nona. Forgive me. I guess my nerves are just rubbed raw." He kissed her and there was ardor in her answering kiss. But Brian released her almost guiltily. "I'll get the horse," he said.

A few minutes later, Nona asked, "Aren't you going to put on the metal suit?"

Brian shook his head. "I don't think we'll need it any more."

"But what if we meet more pols?"

"They don't seem very dangerous to me."

"You defeated them, but they are afraid of the suit. Why fight if you don't have to?"

Brian grinned. "Would you be happier if I wore it?"

Nona looked soberly out across the hills and nodded.

"All right. I'll put the damned thing on."

And Nona's advice proved sound. Late that afternoon they came upon a large party of pols that ran forward boldly until they could clearly see the visored figure on the horse. They stopped to stare in amazement, then broke and ran. Possibly the news of a metal monster rising out of the forbidden ruin had gotten around. At any rate, the pols feared the suit of mail.

IT WAS during mid morning of the third day that Nona's soft cry of fear startled Brian from his thoughts and caused his to rein up his mount.

"What is it?" Brian asked. "Pols?"

"No. There." Nona's slim arm pointed ahead and slightly to the east. "Can't you see them? The giants guarding the great building."

Brian peered out from his bulky helmet to see faintly, in the far distance, what first appeared to be a low wall of colored clouds. But, upon closer inspection, he discovered the cloud-wall to be made up of suspiciously humanoid forms.

"It's too far to tell," he said. "We've got to go closer." He sensed rather than felt the trembling of Nona's body. "Are you afraid?"

"No," the girl whispered.

"Don't kid me. You're scared stiff. And I don't blame you. I'm scared myself. If those things are real—"

"They *are* real. Let's go back to the tribe, Brian. You've admitted for the first time that you're frightened. Let's go back."

"You don't understand. The sight of those monsters would scare anyone, but that's no excuse for quitting. I've been scared before and I'll be scared again, but that's no excuse for crawling under a rock."

He veered course slightly and they rode for a time in silence. Finally Nona said, "I think I'm beginning to understand, Brian. I have a new feeling about things. It's—it's a kind of heady feeling—being frightened and yet riding straight into danger."

Brian reached back and pressed her thigh with a gauntleted hand. "Good girl," he said.

But his manner was preoccupied. As they moved forward, the towering entities became clearer in outline. They were vari-colored and were formed into a huge circle as though standing guard. Brian estimated them to be over forty feet in height—living monsters out of

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some nightmare fairy tale of the past. They were of various shapes—thin and venomous-looking, huge and thick of muscle—and were engaged in walking back and forth, swinging great clubs or sitting in apparent conversation with each other.

Brian was stunned at the sight. Some had hideously tusked jaws; others possessed three and four eyes in huge obscene heads. The over-all impression was one of unadulterated horror under a high and brightly shining sun. A sight well calculated to make a man run for cover.

"It's incredible," Brian muttered. "It's not *possible.*"

"You *do* believe now, don't you?" Nona asked eagerly. But for the first time, she passed up an opportunity to plead a retreat. This was a notable victory for the girl, but Brian was too preoccupied to notice.

"I don't know whether to believe or not," he said. "Maybe everyone in this crazy world is stark mad and I've finally joined the ranks."

The patient horse, with utter lack of imagination, plodded forward. Brian's eyes remained glued upon the monsters as a new wealth of detail became apparent. He estimated there were at least five hundred of them and began asking himself questions. Who maintained control over these hideous giants? By what discipline did they remain in the rough circle instead of breaking out across the prairie? He found no answers to the questions.

THE CIRCLE of giants was scarce a half mile distant now. Brian pulled up his mount. "You get down," he said. "Hide behind that boulder and wait for me. Move slowly. None of them have seen us yet. They won't know you're here."

Nona started to dismount, then stopped. "If you are going closer, I want to—"

"*Get down.*"

Without further objection, Nona dropped to the ground. Her eyes, deep with concern, were on Brian. "You'll be careful?"

"Get behind the boulder. Wait for me."

He nudged the horse with his heel and continued forward; but at a walk now, tensed for the moment when one of the monsters would glance his way.

When they continued unaware of his presence, he attributed the oversight to their great size. It would be much the same as a bull elephant catching sight of a slowly moving rabbit. But at any moment now they would discern movement on the prairie.

At a quarter of a mile, Brian pulled his mount to a stop. The giants continued with their activities, oblivious of his presence.

This just isn't true, he told himself. *A life form of this type could not evolve in two thousand years. It is some vast hoax.*

Then he noticed something else; something only the passage of time could reveal. He was certain the movements of the monsters were not haphazard. Each one, while seeming entirely casual, was conforming to a fixed pattern of motion; repeating it over and over again until the pattern began to register in Brian's mind. An obvious answer struck him.

Robots!

Some science, past or present, had created these huge nightmare entities. Beyond doubt they were mechanical. That explained why they were allowed the freedom of the prairie and why they remained constantly in their circle.

Something of relief flooded Brian; but relief from solving a problem rather than release from peril. Now that he realized what he believed to be the truth, the absurdity of their being alive struck him full force. There

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wouldn't be enough food within a day's ride to furnish a single meal for this vast company.

But what do? He had been told of the existence of this vanguard and had not believed it. Now the truth had been driven home. Should he retreat and concede the great building was unapproachable? Out of his thinking came no plan, only a conviction:

I've got to get closer. I can't leave it this way. I've got to get as close as I can before they see me and do whatever they are predestined to do. When they spot me I'll make a run for it but not until then.

He put heel to the flank and again moved forward. The distance shortened to a few furlongs. The giants went calmly on with their monotonous routines. On sudden thought, Brian turned in his saddle, looked backward and smiled briefly. Nona was not hiding. She stood upon the boulder which should have been concealing her and Brian knew her eyes were riveted upon him. He felt quick warmth for her tremulous concern. Then he gave his attention back to the monsters.

The intervening distance became two hundred yards—shortened to one hundred feet. Ever closer he went until the nearest giants could have reached down and scooped him up into a palm the size of a dump truck. Nothing happened. Brian came to a halt hard under a veritable mountain of vari-colored horror.

There was something wrong here. While he sat motionless, his instincts refused to believe what his eyes told him. They were there in all their hideousness, bulking over him. But somehow, he could not *sense life*. Even in the face of this vast flesh-bulk, he felt utterly and entirely alone.

A nerve quickened in his forehead. Ticked like the buzzing of a rattlesnake. His eyes widened. He nudged the horse and again moved forward.

Forward—straight through the tree-like leg of the closest giant. Reaction was instantaneous. He wrenched the helmet from his head, threw it to the ground, laughed with a touch of hysteria engendered by relief. He roweled the startled horse and went pounding back across the prairie after Nona.

"THIS PROVES there are far more intelligent and advanced beings in this world than I've encountered so far. The setup is positively ingenious."

Brian was referring to the great circle of symetrical machinery that arced off the prairie at the feet of the giants.

"As nearly as I can figure it out, these mirrors serve a double purpose. They collect and concentrate the sun's rays and also act as lenses through which the pictures of the giants are reflected against the sky. I think this string of containers somehow stores up sunlight to be used on cloudy days."

He bent down and indicated other parts of the intricate mechanisms to the silent Nona. "This is the film projector. It's completely automatic and the film is an endless belt going around and around."

Nona was staring up at the huge forms as though unable to convince herself they weren't real even though she'd walked through them.

"And there is something more here, than we ever had in the old days. The picture has a three-dimensional reality that's astounding. Even knowing what they are, you get a shiver walking through them."

"And this," Nona said with wonder, "is what the tribes have feared for hundreds of years!"

"Somehow I can hardly blame them. There's sheer genius behind this set-

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up—and audacious confidence." He turned to glance at the huge fortress-like building now revealed some five or six miles inside the circle. "These aryans, as you call them, are smart. They know the weaknesses of the tribes. They've gambled for generations that no member of the tribes would approach this circle close enough to discover the truth. This is the first time they've lost their bet."

"Are you sure?"

"What do you mean? Isn't it obvious?"

"Maybe others discovered the secret—and were killed."

Brian frowned. It annoyed him that Nona possessed flashes of logic superior to his own. "You may be right, but there is nothing we can do about it. We have to go on."

Nona smiled and, for the first time, an uneasiness from that silence. "Well," he said harshly. "You have nobody to blame but yourself. You insisted on coming along. I can't be blamed for leading you into danger."

Nona smiled and, for the first time, a subtle change was apparent. She was no longer entirely the underdog. She was meeting Brian on his own ground. The nuances of her mind were competing ably with those of Brian's.

"Who are you trying to convince?" she asked. "I haven't said anything about going back."

Brian flushed. "Climb up," he snapped.

Nona got nimbly up behind the saddle and Brian mounted in front of her. He had planned to discard, once and for all, the cumbersome mail suit, but it entirely slipped his mind.

They rode in silence now, their attention riveted on the great brooding edifice toward which they moved. Brian estimated it to be at least two city blocks in width. Its length was harder to estimate but it was more than double the width.

THE PLACE was built like a fortress and had all the mood and menace of a medieval castle. What man or group of men, now long forgotten, had caused this frowning pile to be? Had it existed before the bomb? Brian wondered about this and many other things as the gray walls grew larger.

But now he gave off wondering as a new and unknown factor intruded upon his consciousness. He brought the horse to a standstill, turned his head partially, and frowned.

"Do you feel that?"

"Feel what?"

Brian pondered. "I don't know exactly. It's sort of a pulsing in the air. I can't define it, yet—"

"I don't feel anything. It must be your nerves."

"Maybe, but I'm sure it's something I never felt before. It's somehow as though the air were alive. I—I can't explain it"

Nona was silent, and after an interval of frowning, Brian urged the horse forward. But the impression of force and life that had come to him did not vanish. Uneasily, he envisioned a great power of some sort, hurling forth emanations that found response somewhere within him.

Then he shook his head sharply. It must, as Nona had said, be nerves. Lack of rest, tension, the bewildering transition from the world he had known into this drab haunting place of empty prairies, empty hearts, empty souls.

And came the question: *Why am I here? What insane suspension of all the laws resulted in this ghoulish joke? What unfeeling god would rocket a man out of his place and time and into a place and time of such contrast as*

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to be sickening to the point of mental nausea?

And his silent cry went up to know why—why—why. No answer in the whispering of the grasses, in the lonesome silence of the sky.

Here then was the answer perhaps? In this gray pile ahead? Brian's natural courage returned and he was glad Nona had not sensed his moment of weakness and discouragement.

Finally they could go no farther, because the sheer gray rock of the building's north wall loomed above them. They looked in both directions. No suggested opening of any kind save a series of narrow slits high up in the wall.

"We'll try the east," Brian said.

But the east wall was also unmarred by any door or portal of entrance. It was, if possible, more desolate; more lonely.

"Are you sure this place is inhabited? It looks like the most deserted in the universe."

"Oh, yes. I'm sure. This is where the aryans live. They've always lived here. This is where the pols bring the taxus from the tribes."

"Maybe—maybe not."

"You say that as though you have some definite idea."

"I have. The pols, of course, exist. I know that. But no one has ever seen an aryan. They could be a colossal hoax dreamed up by the pols to make their own hold more secure over the tribes. If you tell a lie often enough—"

"I don't understand."

"Never mind. We'll try the other end."

They traveled on and rounded the corner of the building to see only an expanse of gray wall. "It's no use," Brian muttered. "Whoever built this holed themselves up from the inside. It's the damndest thing I ever heard of. A building without doors. These people are cowards too. The only way they differ from the tribes is that they did something about it."

"WILL YOU come this way please?"

Brian turned with such energy that he scraped his cheek on the collar of his iron suit. Nona's eyes turned also. A woman stood by the wall.

She was about twenty feet behind them, in a place they had passed but a moment before. Then they had found the wall to be smooth and unbroken. Now there was an opening where a rectangle of rock had swung inward.

The woman was tall, of clear olive complexion and calm, commanding eye. Hers was a queenly beauty charged with hauteur and coldness which could be almost felt as a chill on the breeze. She wore a plain robe of rich gray material which fell from a high neck over a magnificent bosom down a slim body to touch the grass upon which she stood.

Brian muttered, "Holy smoke!" and brought the horse around, not removing his eyes from the striking figure by the wall.

The woman frowned and raised an imperious hand. "I said this way, please! And hurry. We haven't much time. Even now Lorento may have cut us off."

Nona turned frightened eyes toward Brian. He gave her a brief smile. "Well, we were looking for a way in, weren't we?"

The anger of the queenlike woman became doubly apparent. "Will you two oafs do as I say? I'm not in the habit of continually repeating myself."

Brian swung down from the horse, reached up and caught Nona around the waist and brought her down also. "What will we do with our horse?" he asked the woman in gray.

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"Leave it. Hurry."

"Wait until I take off the saddle and bridle."

"Are you mocking me?" the woman asked furiously.

Brian turned slowly to look at her. It was as though a coating of thick grease had suddenly been wiped from his consciousness, allowing his true personality to shine through. He grinned.

"Take it easy, baby. This is my good and faithful steed. He rates a break."

As Brian stripped the saddle away, he was conscious of two things: The startled look on Nona's face as she regarded him through wide eyes. Her manner was that of meeting a surprising person for the first time.

Also he was aware of the quick flush on the throat and face of the gray woman. "We'll have a reckoning, you and I," the woman said, "but there is no time now. Free the animal and come inside immediately."

He slapped the horse's rump and turned toward the newly made entrance, urging Nona along ahead of him. The woman in gray also urged Nona. "Hurry, child, hurry. Turn right and follow the corridor."

She insisted that Brian precede her into the building. "Move quickly. I'll have to close the door. Move, I said! This is no time for formalities."

And as he passed her, Brian felt an odd warmth when she said, "That's about the most outlandish getup I ever saw. You look like a walking sheet metal shop."

"And I feel like one too. How do you close the door?"

"Don't be so curious."

"All right. I won't. How did you know we were here?"

"I saw you come through the barrier. You're lucky you came from the north or Lorento might have seen you."

"By the barrier do you mean that oversized moving-picture outfit?"

THE WOMAN pressed a brick and the door swung silently into place. Then she brushed hastily past him without answering his question. Her perfume, a rare scent, touched Brian's nostrils delicately like a sweep of her own beautiful hands.

"I'll lead the way," she said. "Try to keep on your feet. I don't feel like picking up any old iron today."

Brian grinned and clanked along the passage behind Nona, who stayed close to their guide.

"My name is Brian Courtney. This is Nona."

The woman did not reply and Brian added, "It's customary to exchange names on occasions such as this. Or have you been in this mausoleum too long to remember?"

The woman whirled and threw Brian a viperish glance. "If I'd known—" Then she continued on along the passageway without finishing the remark. "I am Varna," she said abruptly.

"I'm happy to know you," Brian said. "Now if you'll just tell us where we're going."

"You'll find out when we get there—if we get there."

"I don't understand your constant doubt."

As though his statement were a cue, the doubt was quickly and violently explained. An intersection of passages broke the monotony of solid wall and from a place of hiding there sprang a tall, athletic-looking youth filled with grimness of purpose. He threw his arms around Varna and commanded, "You are to come with me. Lorento's orders!"

It is possible he thought Varna to be alone, not having sighted Nona and Brian bringing up the rear. Although

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how he could have helped hearing Brian was a mystery.

In the scant light of widely placed neon tubes, Brian saw quick fear wash across Varna's face only to be replaced by indignation and anger. The youth, seeking to pull her into the transverse passage, succeeded only in tripping her, and they both went sprawling to the stone floor.

The youth started to rise. Then, suddenly he froze as he caught first sight of Nona. His eyes widened. For a moment he hung motionless half on and half off the floor. Then Brian, stepping forward, loomed into his range of vision and the spell was broken. With a wordless bark of surprise, the youth got to his feet, reversed directions, and vanished down the cross-corridor.

Brian bent over Varna and his eyes were quite frankly upon the lovely legs revealed by the breathtaking displacement of her skirt.

She was entirely conscious of his gaze and flushed even as her indignation remained. Then their eyes met and words were unnecessary. Brian grinned.

"They're beautiful," he said. "I don't know who that lad was but I'll thank him at the first opportunity. Here—let me help you up."

"Take your hands off me!"

"Then get up yourself. I try to remember my manners, angel, but I have to have some cooperation."

Varna was on her feet now, angrily brushing the dust from her dress.

"Damn you!" Varna flashed a single look, calculated to wilt an oak tree. But it didn't wilt Brian. He smiled engagingly and said, "Iron gloves *are* a little rough."

Varna whirled and moved so swiftly along the corridor that Brian had a difficult time hauling his metal suit along after her.

IT SEEMED to him that they'd walked five miles along everlasting neon-lighted corridors before they came finally into a great baronial hall, the walls of which were hung with flaming banners. It was an amazing room in that it possessed all the stiffness and dignity of an ancient castle hall. Yet there were soft chairs, thick rugs on the stone floors and appointments which Brian recognized as coming from his own time.

"This is the central room of our apartment," Varna said. "Maybe you'd better sit down and rest a while before I show you to your rooms."

"Then we aren't to be executed immediately!"

"Don't try my patience too far." Varna turned to Nona. "Are you hungry, child? There are some cakes on the table and that wine is very good. We make it ourselves, from grapes grown in the south."

"Do you accept grapes as taxus?" Brian asked.

"Certainly," Varna snapped. "Everything we use is brought in from the outside."

"A neat little racket." Brian expected a sharp retaliation from Varna, but none was forthcoming. She was not aware, he decided, of the meaning of that Twentieth Century term.

Nona was sampling the cakes and apparently finding them good. Varna turned from the table, swept queenlike to an overstuffed divan and sat down. She turned amused eyes on Brian. "Why don't you remove your outer garments now, Mr. Courtney? Or are they all you have on?"

Brian scowled at her, which seemed to deepen her amusement, and began peeling off his stiff garb. This took several minutes, after which Varna surveyed him with beautiful impersonality, took in the crudely made fur clothing underneath, and said, "It cer-

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tainly isn't any improvement. You seem to have a knack for looking your worst."

"I'm sure I could do much better if I had a nation of slaves to make regular deliveries of tribute."

Varna straightened in what was evidently genuine surprise. For a moment she wore a puzzled look. Then the old anger flared. "You impudent lout! Whom do you think you're addressing? That accounting may come sooner than you expect."

Brian felt warmly comfortable inside. He sat down at the other end of Varna's divan, partially facing her. "I apologize," he said smugly.

Varna started to speak, caught her lower lip in her teeth and got up. She arose with dignity and Brian watched, fascinated, at the smooth flow of her body when she walked to the table.

"Come, child. I'll show you your room. You must be tired." Totally ignoring Brian, she led Nona away.

Left alone, Brian's manner sobered considerably. He arose and stood surveying the vast hall. A slight frown came to his face and remained there as he took stock of the situation. Then again he became conscious of that strange, even surge of power that seemed to flow from somewhere, through his body. Bu it was stronger now—much stronger. He sat down again, leaned back, closed his eyes.

VARNA HAD changed her gown. She now wore one of soft blue. But it clung with no less affection to her breathtaking body. Brian was entirely comfortable—for the first time since his resurrection—in a loose-fitting tunic and shorts. He sat again in the great hall while Varna nervously paced the floor.

"I think I understand why you met us at the wall, now," Brian said. "With the revolt which you say exists in this building, you need allies."

Varna stopped to stand before him. Her guard had slipped and for a moment her voice held a pleading note. "Are you always so hard, so critical, so brutal?" she asked.

"My attitude is shaped by what I see. I can hardly be sympathetic toward a power group that periodically kidnaps the strongest young men, the fairest girls—"

"But I explained that. Nothing sinister happens to them. We need a certain amount of help here. We need the youths and they must lead normal healthy lives to be happy and contented. Therefore, the girls must be brought in to become first sweethearts and then wives. There is no discontent among them."

"Why don't you use the pols for your labor? Or rather, why don't you get rid of the cowardly little sadists? Terrorizing the tribes year after year. What authority do they have?"

"None, except what we give them—the authority to collect taxus which we need to exist. They are a necessary unit in our civilization. Whatever they do is a requirement of maintaining the system."

"And by what right is the system maintained?"

"It is the only one under which the tribes can stay alive. For hundreds of years it has been so. We, here in the great building, are superior to the tribesmen. We have to be in order to do our work. We care little what goes on outside so long as the system functions."

"Your synthetic giants—I suppose they keep you safe?"

"They have held back the tribes for time immemorial and will continue to do so. By using them we are indirectly protecting the tribes from ruining themselves by being too inquisitive."

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"In other words you don't want them to know what goes on in here?"

"Of course not—only through secrecy can the great principle continue to function."

"All this is just double-talk, you know. You speak of principles and systems functioning—of the work you do. I've seen no work. All I see are luxurious parasites riding on the backs of the tribes."

Varna's face flamed with fury. "I planned to tell you of our purpose here—our reason for being, but that nasty tongue of yours— Oh, why do I bother with you!"

"For two reasons," Brian said blandly. "The first one is that you need me. You wouldn't have rushed over to let us in if you hadn't."

"The second?"

Brian got up and approached her. The mockery was gone from his face now—overshadowed by something deeper and more elemental. With no hesitation, he took Varna into his arms. Her first reaction was sheer surprise. It held her helpless while he bent her backward and laid his mouth roughly upon hers.

He knew, however, that her helplessness would not last, so he took wise precautions. By the time she reacted, he had his fist firmly entwined in her hair so her head was held motionless. Also her arms were firmly locked. He kissed her again.

"The second reason is that you're lonely. A lovely woman wanting love and not finding it. Now you've found it and don't realize it's here. You love me, Varna. Otherwise you wouldn't have taken the insults I've poured out. And I love you. I knew it out by the wall when I first saw you." He kissed her again.

"Let me go, you swine!"

"So you can have me killed? I'm no fool, darling."

HIS MOUTH bruised down hard against hers. He could feel the quivering of her body against his and felt her teeth cut through his cheek.

"Stop it, you cat!" He locked her mouth hard to his own and spoke against the impediment of her grinding teeth. "This won't get you anywhere. Stop being antagonistic. I'm here and I've got to be reckoned with. I'm here because you want me."

"Damn you—damn you—damn you—"

But now, magically, his kiss was being returned. Her resistance reversed and became a fiery drive. The world spun around Brian, but in the whirlpool of this passionate acknowledgement came Varna's token resistance—her last defiant banner. "Damn you—damn you—damn you—"

"Damn you too," Brian throated huskily, and drank from her fountain of pentup passion.

"I'll see you dead and cold—"

"You wouldn't like me that way—"

"Kill you—kill you—"

"I'm not sure that you can—"

"This means nothing—against my will—nothing at all—"

"Liar—"

"I hate you—hate you—kiss me—"

"Thank you—don't mind if I do—"

"You devil—you fiend—I'll see you cold—"

Brian grinned inwardly while spinning in the whirlpool. This was completely familiar to him—a love he understood. There had been a love like this long, long before. A wild, frustrating, brutal, tempestuous, happy love.

Jennifer—long gone—long gone—long gone—faintly perfumed nostalgia—two thousand years.

The pounding finally penetrated their tempest. Brian released Varna and stepped backward from where she stood swaying. "Someone's knocking.

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You have company."

Varna unconsciously straightened her hair, looked about with slightly glazed eyes. Her gaze came to the great oaken panel from which the pounding resounded.

"I'll go," Brian said. He crossed the room and opened the door.

A tall, handsome man stood outside. He locked eyes with Brian and his eyes elevated in a disdain to match his hostile gaze. He asked, "Who are you?"

"A guest," Brian replied. "Who are you?"

The doorway was wide and the man strode confidently into the room without having to pass close to Brian. The latter watched him as he crossed and stood imperiously before Varna, arms folded, unconsciously burlesquing the manners of a grade-B movie king.

Varna sought also for some semblance of dignity. The man however, sensed her true state. He turned to hurl a threatening look at the now approaching Brian. "What's been going on here?" he demanded. And again of Varna, "Who is this oaf?"

VARNA WAS amazingly docile, the arrogant fire of her still struggling to keep aflame in the whirlpool. "Brian Courtney," she said by way of formal introduction. "Brian, this is Lorento, of whom I have spoken."

"Glad to know you," Brian said.

Lorento ignored him, settled all attention on Varna. "I suppose you're surprised to see me here?"

"Somewhat."

"I've come to give you a last chance. You can't win, of course. I have all the forces in my half of the building. We outnumber you three to one."

Varna got back some of her queenlike dignity. "I am Director here. It is legal. Custom is on my side. I will remain Director."

"You have only to sign a paper vacating your position. It will prevent bloodshed."

"You're wasting your breath."

Lorento eyed her with calculation. "If you sign peacefully you will remain honored among us. None of your privileges will be taken away. If I bring you to terms by force, however, you'll be my chattel. And possibly I'd rather have you that way."

Brian stepped close to Lorento. "I didn't like that last remark," he said, and slammed a fist against Lorento's jaw.

The latter went down. He shook his head groggily, got slowly to his feet and advanced. Brian was ready for him, or so Brian thought. But he wasn't ready for the fist that came out of nowhere. Looking up from the floor, he saw three Lorentos. He got up and went for the center one. But the Lorento on the left must have hit him when he wasn't looking because he went down again. The three Lorentos took a step forward but were stopped by Varna's voice.

"Leave him alone! You know it's work time. This is the Hour of the Machine. Even you wouldn't violate that, Lorento."

The man stepped back reluctantly. "You're right. It is the Hour of the Machine." He turned toward the door.

"Just let me hit him once more," Brian said groggily. "One more good punch."

Lorento looked down contemptuously and left the hall without further word. Brian blinked stupidly and saw Varna bending down to help him up. There was a light of wicked pleasure in her eyes. "You did very well," she commented acidly. "You had him right where he wanted you."

"Cut it out. The fight hadn't even started yet."

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"It looked to me as though it were about over."

Brian, now on his feet, tenderly nursed a jaw and asked, "What's this Hour of the Machine business?"

"It is our time for work. Nothing must interfere with it. That is the unwritten law. Come with me and I'll explain our reason for being. Why, the world would be finished without us."

THE MACHINE was in a vast room set in the exact center of the building. It seemed mainly to consist of a great central tube of shimmering glass. It arose at least four stories in height and was over two hundred feet thick at its base. Complementing it on all sides was a vast array of shining mechanisms reaching from floor to ceiling and accessible by catwalks and steel stairways.

At one end of the hall was a large dais upon which were chairs before tables fitted with instruments and controls. Varna sat at the highest of these tables. Beside her stood Brian, marveling at the sight before him. On a lower platform just under that of Varna, sat Lorento, crouching sullenly over his instrument table. There were other men on down the scale at lower tables.

And going here and there, up and down the spiral staircases, along the catwalks, were alert young men in pale blue uniforms, all pursuing certain jobs with what was evidently complete understanding.

"This is why—we of the great building "This is why we of the great building exist—to tend it, repair it, keep it functioning."

"But what on earth is it for? What *is* its function?"

Varna paused to push several buttons and adjust a pair of dials. "Many centuries ago, the world was visited by a terrible holocaust of destruction. It started at the time you lived before."

"You don't have to explain that. I was there. The first bomb got me."

"But that was only the beginning. The war went on and on, and the nation was almost depopulated. Just what happened when it was over, we don't know. One thing, however, is certain. The terrible mixture of many lethal and partially lethal radiations had an adverse affect upon the heart. People who were not killed outright or poisoned died in another way. Very slowly, the heart stopped beating. It was a gradual lessening of the beat, as we understand it. A healthy heart, in the grip of these cross-radiations, became gradually slower and weaker of beat over a period of possibly a month. Final death came after a period of unconsciousness with the heartbeat a mere vanishing flutter which finally stopped altogether."

"But where is the connection between all that and—this?"

AGAIN VARNA'S duties occupied her time. It was several minutes before she continued.

"Where is the connection? We are not sure ourselves. According to what is partially authenticated, a scientist hiding in a Kentucky cave began giving his attention to this strange form of death—this heart phenomenon. As the result of his studies, he devised a machine which set up control over a very high rate of vibration; an inexhaustible vibration which was only waiting to be used.

"He discovered that, under the discipline of a seventy-two-beat-per-minute magnification and release, the vibration found sympathetic acceptance in the human heart muscles and would cause the heart to pulse evenly. He discovered that patients almost dead from lessening heart action responded to the vibration and became normal so

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long as they stayed within the radius of the experimental machine's power."

"Great heavens!" Brian muttered, struck squarely with the wonder of the thing. "A monster machine, beating out a vibration here in this building—sending out a heart beat by which all the people live!"

"It is—"

Brian laid a hand upon Varna's shoulder. "That explains the method of execution used by the pols."

Varna turned, frowning. "Execution? I don't understand."

"I saw the pols put a member of Mark's tribe in a plain, lead-lined box. That must have cut him off from the help of the heart machine. He died instantly."

"The pols have no authority to execute people. Execution is not necessary. The people are docile."

"But the youth died instantly," Brian said, still wrapped up in scientific aspects. "Why did he die so quickly when originally the—?"

"Are you sure the pols did this?"

"Of course. I saw them. The instantaneous death could have resulted partly from psychology—the knowledge in the victim's mind that the box meant death."

"Some disciplining of the pols will be necessary," Varna said, frowning. "But to go on—there is a gap in history between the Kentucky cave and this building housing a machine that services the nation. We don't know who constructed either the building or the machine. There is a gap in the records. But we have been functioning here for hundreds and hundreds of years, and out of it has arisen a pattern of life which goes on and on and will continue to do so."

Now Lorento, during a lull in his duties, glanced around and saw Brian's hand placed familiarly upon Varna's shoulder. The man scowled darkly. There was threat—the promise of violence—in his eyes.

"He's in love with you, angel," Brian whispered, grinning. "He's so nuts in love he can't see straight."

"Lorento?" Varna frowned and shrugged Brian's hand from her shoulder. "That's absurd. I could never have any feeling for him!"

"It's just his hard luck that he doesn't know how to handle wildcats, darling. I've had experience along those lines. Wildcats are right up my alley."

"You conceited oaf! I have only contempt for you. That incident in the hall meant nothing. You held me against my will. You and I, my conceited friend, are due for a reckoning."

But Brian was hardly listening. He had sobered considerably and his eyes were vague with thought. "A pattern of life," he muttered. "A pattern for today—but what about a pattern for tomorrow?" He leaned forward quickly. "Tell me about this revolt in the building."

"It began when Lorento became jealous of—"

"Never mind the details. They aren't what I'm interested in. But tell me this—has there ever been such a revolt before?"

"No—that's why it is so frightening—so bewildering. There has never been any reason to—"

"There have always been reasons for anything people must do, angel." A peculiar change had come over Brian; not so much a change as a deepening of thought; a greatening of force which seemed to be generated from within. "I've seen enough of this," he said. "I'm going back. I'll see you when you're through."

"I'd like you to stay here," Varna replied. It was a command but Brian scarcely heard it. He moved toward

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the exit in complete preoccupation, not even noting that Lorento had left his post and was nowhere in sight.

The pattern, Brian muttered vaguely. The great cosmic scheme—the thought force of divinity—the pattern for today—the pattern for tomorrow—the people—they talk so much—and have so little to say.

IT WAS in the passageway, close to Varna's apartment, with Brian completely preoccupied, that he was savagely attacked from a side corridor. As the first blow was struck, he came back to the place and the time to realize the neons in this section had been turned off.

Brian went down under the first onslaught of his attacker, and became occupied with the business of protecting himself. A knee went violently into his groin. He steeled himself against the retching pain, turned on his stomach and heaved upward to relieve himself of his opponent's weight. The latter sailed through the air and grunted with the eloquence of pain when he hit the wall.

Brian got to his feet and charged in on the theory that attack is the best defense. He found his man and drove a fist into the place he hoped the belly would be. He brought a second grunt of pain and a counter-left that flushed blood from his nose.

But even at this stage, Brian knew he had nothing to fear. There was more panic than science behind his adversary's blows and the going got swiftly easier. Two short lefts sent the man reeling backward with a sob of pain. A moment of complete silence followed, during which Brian got set for a countercharge.

But none came. The silence continued and Brian finally realized he was once more alone. He continued on to the apartment and made a few quick repairs on his battered visage. He stopped the bleeding, washed the cuts and changed his tunic.

And he went about these necessary chores with a preoccupation which was not a characteristic. He hardly realized what he was doing, so great was his concentration on the new role into which he had stepped.

After he again looked presentable, he returned to the central hall and sat for a time in deep thought, after which he got up and found his way to the door of Nona's room. He knocked and thought he heard quick movements on the inside, a low, whispered exclamation of dismay. Frowning and now alert, Brian threw open the door and entered. "I thought maybe you were in trouble," he said. "I thought—"

He stopped speaking, took in the scene. Nona sat on the edge of her bed. Her hair was somewhat disheveled, but otherwise she looked normal except for the great sobs wracking her shoulders and the manner in which she held her face hidden in her arms.

STANDING close by was a youth whose bitter and resentful eyes remained glued upon Brian's face. The youth's face was nothing to be proud of. It bore several lurid marks of combat.

"Wait a minute," Brian said. "I know you. You're the lad who tried to kidnap Varna when we first entered the building."

"I'm Nailon," the youth answered sullenly. "Yes. I tried to follow orders and take Varna to Lorento. I failed."

"It didn't matter. Lorento came to Varna. What are you doing here?"

Before the lad could answer, Nona raised her head to reveal a tragic tear-stained face. She ran to Brian and dropped on her knees before him. "Please!" she cried. "Please don't punish him. Punish me! I'm the one who has betrayed you—been untrue!"

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Brian stared in amazement, then glanced over at the youth who seemed trying to make up his mind about what to do. "Now wait a minute," Brian said, lifting Nona to her feet. "Stop this crying and let's start from the beginning. This boy saw you in the passageway when we came in and wanted to see more. Isn't that right?"

"Nailon is one of Lorento's followers, but he doesn't want to be. He slipped over here that first night and came to my room. I know I should have sent him away, but I was lonely—I—"

Brian did not allow the inward grin to reach his face. He assumed a very serious mien and said, "Nona, does this mean you are no longer in love with me—that you've changed your mind?"

The girl, in an agony of contrition, tried to lower her face, but Brian held firm fingers under her chin. "I know I deserve whatever punishment is in store for me, but I didn't mean to be disloyal. I thought I loved you when we rode together across the prairie, but—"

Brian raised his eyes to Nailon. "It was you then who attacked me just now?"

Nailon nodded, still sullen and now charged with hopelessness. "I thought if you were out of the way—" He turned his eyes on Nona with hopeless longing.

"You're from one of the tribes, aren't you?" Brian asked.

The youth nodded. "I was brought here from Landon's tribe to the south. I have been here three years."

"Are you happier here than you were before?"

Nailon shrugged, and Brian had another question. "Tell me. Do you know of any previous case where a boy actually fought for the girl of his choice?"

Nailon glanced up in surprise. "No one ever fights, here, or out there. But never before has such a beautiful girl as Nona been brought to the great building."

"Fancy that," Brian said and returned his eyes to Nona's tearful face.

"Nailon just told me what he did—tried to kill you. I told him it was very wrong. I scolded him."

"You *scolded* him? Nona! I'm surprised at you." He lifted her to her feet and said with great dignity. "My heart is broken, but I do not want a wife I can't be sure of. I release you from your pledge." As she looked startled, he added, "No, I guess I can't do that, can I? We hadn't gotten around to the pledge yet." Then he said, more gruffly. "Go on you two. Take advantage of any time you may have. There may be trouble around here later." He opened the door and turned just before he closed it to say, "Go to my room and wait for me later, Nailon. I want to talk to you."

He went back to the great hall and sat down to await Varna's return.

TWENTY-FOUR hours later, Brian sat in the great central hall beside Varna. Lorento still had not struck.

"This revolt has cut the building roughly in half," Varna said. "Lorento holds the far end and we have all the separating door closed with guards on duty to warn us of an attack."

"And if the attack comes—what will you do?"

Varna shrugged. "Fight, I suppose. But somehow I can't conceive of any violence. It's so unthinkable. For hundreds of years—"

"You'd better get used to it then," Brian said. "There's going to be a lot more of it in the future."

"What do you mean?"

"You've come to the end of an era—the end of a sick, unhealthy age."

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She frowned at him. "You've been acting strangely, darling—and speaking strangely."

Brian noticed what Varna overlooked—that for the first time since he'd known her, she had called him darling. He reached out and took her hand but she drew it away.

"By what authority do you say these things?"

Brian sobered perceptibly. "By none whatever except my own—instinct. I have figured out a great many answers in the last day or two. For instance, I'm certain my being here is no accident. My coming was brought about by some force of nature—call it divinity or whatever you wish—that shapes the cosmic destinies."

"You talk in riddles."

"I'll try not to. Look, Varna—consider the last two thousand or even four thousand years in their proper perspective, a mere afternoon or morning of the great cosmic cycle. And realize, too, that great conscious forces ordain our destiny no matter how we try to circumvent them.

"Consider this—two thousand years ago, mankind tried to destroy itself. Mankind fashioned weapons to depopulate the earth. And almost succeeded. But along came a scientist—by mere coincidence you say? I think not—who at the last moment devised a way to keep the last human hearts beating and save mankind.

"And do you know why? Because the cosmic consciousness or whatever you call it, of whom we are but brain-children, did not want mankind exterminated. So, functioning, as always, through we ourselves, the cosmic brain preserved mankind."

"A fantastic theory. You have no authoritative background for saying—"

"Haven't I? Listen. Four thousand years ago, divinity in the form of a God-Man came to earth. He looked the situation over, saw the established precepts of custom, brutality, injustice. Then he spoke to the people and said: 'Up to now you have done thus and so, *but I say unto you* from this day hence it must be otherwise,' or words to that effect."

Varna frowned in surprise. "Are you claiming—?"

"No. I'm merely illustrating a principle. Jesus was divine, but many of the great prophets were not. They were merely *needed* and they came into being. In a sense I come as they came and I speak in all humility when I say my coming was not an accident. I was preserved for two thousand years and resurrected to help in the ending of an age. On all sides of me I see inexplicable things but now I begin to understand because it has been given me to understand.

"I see mankind, supine, cringing, his face in the mud, and I know why. Two thousand years ago there was so great a catastrophe upon the face of the earth that it almost annihilated mankind. First in defiance, then in terror, then in resignation, he cowered before continued blasts of naked power. As the hammering continued, he crawled, finally, sobbing, into caves, all the moral strength and fiber ripped from his mind, his very soul gutted.

"He survived the thunderings of his own folly, but when he crawled from the cave and blinked again at the sun, a perpetual whine had been built into his voice. His shoulders were bent, his eyes lowered, and he sobbed for only one thing—peace! Peace at any price! Peace with disgrace, loss of dignity, loss of everything—but *Peace*."

BRIAN AGAIN reached out to take Varna's hand. This time she did not draw it away. "Mankind has lived for two thousand years, resting from

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the shock of that atomic nightmare, darling. But in this resting period life had to go on even to the point of giving mankind a crutch—a machine to keep his heart going.

"Now we come to the present—and a coming change of eras foreshadowed by stirrings within mankind. A revolt in the building. Yesterday a boy tried to kill a man he thought wanted his woman. Small things, but—"

"Do you mean that because of a few inconsequential variations in the norm—vicious variations—"

"No. I would be willing to discount them, but my knowledge, gotten from somewhere, tells me they are significant."

"We have complete peace. We've had it for—"

"—for two thousand years, Varna, but it is a rotten peace. The peace of slime over still waters. The peace of dead and rotting carcasses. No progress in the memory of man and there *must* be progress."

"What we have is sufficient."

"No. The law says the cosmic cycle is a moving, living thing. Because of a great shock, there has been a rest period of two thousand years. But that period is over, darling. It is time for mankind to throw away his crutches and walk."

Varna raised her head and stared long and silently into his eyes. The new concepts bewildered her.

Brian said, "There's something I want you to do, Varna."

"What?"

"You must stop the projectors—eliminate the picture giants, and call the tribes together."

Her look said he'd gone completely daft.

"You must do it quickly," he urged. "Before Lorento attacks us. Is there a way you can reach the tribes?"

"Of course. In a room below us a dozen pols are always waiting for orders. It would be possible but—" Varna continued to stare at him and there was something of the hypnotized bird in her uncomprehending eyes.

"Then hurry. I will go with you. You must give the orders immediately or it may be too late."

Varna got up like a sleepwalker and moved out of the hall. Brian followed her silently, down flights of stairs, along endless corridors, until she came finally to a door behind which voices sounded.

Instinct told Brian to remain behind. He stood back as Varna opened the door and went into the next room. Brian, hard by, heard the commands she gave to the pols. He heard the murmur of consternation, more sharp orders, and then silence. A few moments later, Varna came out as she had entered and closed the door. "It is done," she said, in a peculiar monotone.

THEY RETURNED to the hall and sat in silence for a long time, Varna staring straight ahead, Brian absently holding her hand and busy with his thoughts.

Finally Varna turned her head. "You spoke of crutches for mankind."

Brian turned, then got to his feet and drew her erect. His lips had almost touched hers when her eyes widened. She screamed suddenly—a high, eloquent cry of terror—and drew back from him. And there was such consternation and rage in her face as to make Brian start with surprise.

"What have I done?" Varna cried.

"Why, darling, you—"

"*What have I done?* You hypnotized me!"

"I did nothing of the kind." Brian stepped forward.

"Keep back. Don't dare touch me.

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In a moment of weakness I don't understand, I've—I've almost wrecked the system. You fiend! You rotten, rotten devil! Get away from me."

Brian was held motionless by the onslaught. He watched as Varna started toward the corridor door. "Where are you going? What are you going to do?"

She whirled on him, her eyes spitting venom. "Where *can* I go? What *can* I do? It's too late to stop the pols. I have none to send after them! I'm going to Lorento and make peace. I'm going to join forces with him to destroy you! You must be stopped at any cost before the system lies in ruin!"

"Varna—Varna!" But she was gone and there was only the mute door panel mocking him.

Brian slumped into a chair, a period of sharp reaction coming over him. Had he been a fool? Had he been spouting a lot of nonsense formed from his own overweening ego? He closed his eyes and called himself an idiot. He sat for a long time until a soft hand touched his shoulder.

Nona was standing by his chair. She was smiling from some thrilling secret. She said, "Nailon is in my room. He slipped over again. He says you talked to him last night and he wants to report."

"Yes—oh, yes. I talked to him. But I'm afraid it isn't very important now."

"But he wants to see you."

Brian got up and followed Nona to her room. Nailon sat on the bed waiting for him. The youth wore a dejected look. "I wasn't very successful," he said. "I think some of the men want to come over to our side, but they are afraid of Lorento."

"It's too late, I'm afraid. There's no side here to come to. Varna is joining forces with Lorento."

Nailon smiled. "Good. Then we will have no more trouble. None of the men like trouble."

Brian raised his head suddenly. "Will you do something for me?"

"If I can."

"Is it possible for you to get out of the building?"

"Yes. There is a door at the northeast corner I know about. On my off-hours I've done some exploring. I know the building pretty well, I think."

"Good. You've noticed that the giants are gone, of course."

"Yes. It caused quite a lot of excitement. Everyone is wondering why they were turned off."

Brian was surprised. "Then you know they were only pictures?"

"Yes. Our superiors explain those things to us when we are brought here—and the need of them."

"Is there a master switch that controls them? There must be something of the sort."

"There is. The switch boxes are on the north wall. The cable goes out from there across the prairie to the reflectors."

"How deep is the cable?"

"I don't know. Not very far down, though, I wouldn't think. It's dug out and repaired sometimes."

"I want that cable cut."

"Want it—*cut!*"

"It's very important that Lorento isn't able to throw the projections for some time. Can you go out and find the cable and cut it?"

NAILON registered great uncertainty. He looked at Brian and then at Nona, as though for some sort of help. He got it from Nona.

"It's all right, darling—if Brian says so. Whatever Brian tells you is the thing to do."

"You *are* on our side, aren't you?" Brian asked.

"I don't see how you can doubt

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that! I'm on—Nona's side."

"And what could be more natural? Will you cut the cable?"

"All right, but I might be missed from the machine room."

"Never mind about that. If you want to be with Nona, you aren't going back there again. You're going to help us find a place to hide in the building. I've got to hide and wouldn't risk leaving Nona here for them to use against me. They know I'm fond of her and I don't know what they'd do if they really got desperate."

"There are—just the three of us?"

"Yes. Do you think we can stay out of sight for a few days—until the tribes assemble?"

"You mean the tribes are coming to the great building?"

"That's right. It's important that they gather here and the only thing that can stop them is the giants. That's why the cable must be cut."

Nailon was already estimating chances. He took Nona's hand in his and held it tightly. "It's almost an hour before darkness so I'm not going to wait. If I stay in close to the wall I don't think anyone will see me. But if there's going to be trouble I want to get Nona hidden, first. We'll go to the old rooms in the north end. It would take dozens of men to find us there. And even then they'd have to know which end of the building to start looking in."

"Good. Let's go. We'll hide Nona and then we'll go cut the cable."

"You're going with me? I thought you wanted—"

"I just wanted to see if you were really loyal. Let's go."

Nailon did know a great deal about the vast building. He led Brian and Nona out through a myriad of corridors trending ever upward, using a great many which were unlighted, about them the smell and aura of complete desertion. At times he stopped and signaled for silence as footsteps were heard. But each time the sounds diminished and died completely.

"Some of the families live in this wing," Nailon said, "but we've gotten past the used sections now."

He came finally to an echoing corridor with only a single neon tube to give dim radiance. He stopped and pushed open a door. This gave into an apartment dimly lit by a pair of narrow windows giving out onto the prairie. The apartment was furnished, but white sheets thrown over the chairs and tables gave the place a ghostly look.

"This ought to be safe for a while," Nailon said. He took Nona in his arms and kissed her. "You stay here. We'll be back in a little while."

NOW A SECOND long trek began.

Down, down, down, through corridors which angled to become ramps and continued an ever-earthward slant. Nailon, sure-footed, always cautious and alert, stopped at one place to open what appeared to be a long-unused tool chest. "I found this long ago while I was exploring," he said proudly, and handed Brian a shovel. He took one himself, also a hammer and a pair of large pliers.

Exit from the building was made easily. As he put a small stone in the door jam, Nailon said, "We'll be all right if nobody comes along and sees the door open."

"What are the chances?"

"They should be good, but you never can tell."

"Let's hurry then."

They found the place where earth, lately disturbed, indicated the presence of the cable. While they were digging, Nailon straightened suddenly. "If there is danger, why don't the three of us leave the building and strike off

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across the prairie?"

"I thought of that," Brian said, "but I have to be inside when the tribes get here. And I'm afraid the pols would find you and Nona if you tried it alone."

"That's right," Nailon said dully. "The pols."

"How do you feel about them?" Brian asked curiously.

"For a long time—all my life—I didn't think anything about them. They were just—the pols who came to get the taxus. But lately it's different. I'm getting to hate them."

Brian grinned. "Good boy," he said, and his shovel hit something hard.

The cable was not more than an inch thick and presented no great problem. Brian cut it with his wooden handled shovel, bringing out a flash of sparking fire as the blade bit through. "Now let's cover it up again. We don't want them to find the break right away."

In a short time the earth had been replaced and there was no indication anyone had been tampering. Brian wiped his sweating brow and gazed out toward the empty horizon where no monsters profaned the blue background. "Funny they didn't switch the giants on again right away," he said.

"Maybe there was too much excitement when Varna went over to their side. They must have overlooked it."

"Maybe. Well, they're out of luck now. Let's go back."

The rock was still in place and no one challenged their progress as they climbed their weary way back toward the unused apartment. Once there, they found Nona waiting impatiently. Brian, weary to the bones, threw himself on a lounge and watched the fervid greeting between the two. He grinned. One would have thought the lovers hadn't seen each other in five years.

Then Brian remembered the beautiful Varna and a sadness swept over him. Why, he asked, couldn't it have been different? Why couldn't she have seen it his way? Now all the loneliness, the sense of having come far too many weary miles, overwhelmed him again. He closed his eyes and thought of Chicago's Loop at night; the light and glitter of the world he'd known and loved. He remembered it all so clearly but, strangely, Jennifer was a blur in his recollection. A formless memory of what had once been and was no more. Jennifer of the biting tongue. Lovely Jennifer. He tried to conjure up her image and failed.

He fell now to thinking of the present. The tribes assembling for the first time in this dark, depressing age. He thought also of his own role—the role he had determined to play. Was he a fool even to think of it? Maybe, but something even stronger than his discouragement and depression told him there must be no turning back.

FOR THREE days, they hid in the unused apartment high in the north end of the building. Brian and Nailon staged forays to get food and several times eluded capture by a narrow margin. Once they lay in the shadows while a large party of pols trooped by.

"They're hunting for us," Nailon whispered. "Lorento must be desperate, to bring in the pols." Then he glanced with admiration at Brian. "He must be afraid of you."

Brian shrugged. "It doesn't matter much—but Varna, and her hatred—I—I don't know."

Nona came to him and passed a gentle hand through his untidy hair. "You are tired, very tired. You should rest."

But there was to be no rest, because two simultaneous occurrences presaged

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strenuous activity in the immediate future. The first was the gathering of the tribes. Nailon noticed them first and called from one of the narrow windows.

Brian leaped to a vantage point and there was a mighty heave of emotion within him at sight of the multitudes. They had come quietly and stood now around the building in solidly packed, mute droves.

"There must be thousands of them," Brian muttered, but to him, somehow, they were not people. They were myriads of eyes, staring, unnumbered brains beginning to stir, but remaining stoical, uncomprehending, fearful.

The second occurrence was discovery. A sudden pounding on the door, unheralded and coming as even more of a shock than the assembling of the tribes.

"They've found us," Nailon muttered dully.

Brian was filled suddenly with bitterness. So near to the objective. Yet so far away. Another hour would have done it. A chance to leave the apartment, go undiscovered to the great central room which housed the heart machine. Brian listened. "They seem to know we're here. And there are quite a few of them."

Nona asked. "Do you think they'll break down the door?"

"If they have to. We have only one poor weapon left. Reason. Open the door. I'll try to talk to them."

"You won't get much chance if Lorento is out there," Nailon said. He was trying to keep up his courage by holding Nona in his arms as though to draw strength from her body. Brian walked slowly across the room and opened the door.

Varna entered. Behind her, Brian saw a dozen men—a mixture of workers and pols. Then Varna closed the door on them and stood with her back to it. She looked at Nailon and Nona—looked through eyes red with weeping, charged deeply with a chaos of emotion. "Send them away."

Brian motioned to the lovers. Reluctantly, they went into the next room and closed the door.

"The tribes answered the call," Varna said with a strange lifelessness. "There are thousands of them out there—and more coming."

"Yes—thousands. But why have you come? To have me killed?"

"Two of my pols followed you here. But I think Lorento knows too. He will be coming soon."

"Then you didn't join forces with him?"

"Yes. But still I've come to warn you and protect you if possible. I have a dozen men who are loyal to me. I think we can get you out of the building. Away from here."

BRIAN WALKED toward her. She pressed her back against the door, seemed hypnotized. "Stay away from me!"

"I'll never be able to stay away from you."

"Don't touch me! Keep your hands down!"

"No." He drew her toward him. "You're a fool to fight it," he said.

"No—damn you! No, no!"

He kissed her. Pressed the words of denial back into her throat and down until they were only a sobbing in her breast. She sobbed while he kissed her, clung to him in a frenzy for a brief instant. Then she cursed him and drew back.

He grinned.

"Now will you leave before it's too late? Lorento is coming. Lorento hates you even more than I do. If he comes I'll watch him kill you. I hope he does! Then this devilish spell may be broken."

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"Love isn't a spell. There's nothing you can do about love. Not even a hell cat like you."

"We still have time."

They stood looking at each other for a long moment. Then Brian said. "The time is gone. There's nothing left but to fight."

Varna too heard the first echoes of combat from the corridor. The cries. The rush of feet. Brian called sharply and his two companions hurried into the room.

Brian threw open the door and saw the scant dozen waiting outside. They were armed with clubs and were filled with uncertainty. "All of us are traitors now," Brian shouted. "We must stick together and fight our way through." No one agreed, but also there were no objections.

Quickly Brian formed his ranks, he and Nailon in the lead, with the balance of the squad formed around Varna and Nona. He had just time to whisper some instructions to Nailon when the attackers came in head on.

Brian, striving to set an example for his pitiful little army, snatched a club from someone and attacked with spectacular savageness. With a roar of rage, he smashed down the attacking point of Lorento's forces. Swinging his club with viciousness, he cracked two skulls, broke an arm, and drove a knee into an unprotected groin.

The army of Lorento, shocked by such destructive zeal, fell back before the cries and pain from their own ranks.

Now Brian saw the trap—a second contingent coming up from the rear. This could mean quick defeat. A dozen timid men trapped between overwhelming numbers. The only hope was a cross-corridor, some fifty feet beyond. "Come on," Brian yelled. "Drive through. It's our only chance."

The cries of anticipated triumph from behind them gave Brian's men the courage of desperation. They were marked now and there was no chance to change sides. The others, filled with the bravery of their numbers, voiced overtones of hatred in their cries.

In a frenzy, Brian hammered on. Nailon developed also into a warrior of sorts, spurred on no doubt by thoughts of Nona's danger. Between them, Brian and Nailon, clubbed a path into the solid ranks before them —saw men fall, saw the vanguard hesitate, hoping evidently, for help from the rear.

One of the fallen enemy dropped a knife as his skull cracked under Brian's club. Brian snatched up the knife and cut hard through solid flesh.

An opposing knife sliced desperately at his throat, missed, and ripped flesh from his arm. Nailon killed a warrior whose club would have crushed Brian's skull from behind. And the hard-pressed dozen drove forward to escape attack from the rear.

Two of those loyal to Varna were left on the corridor floor, cut down from behind, as the group made their objective and pushed into the cross-corridor.

"Now run!" Brian shouted. "Follow Nailon and me! Keep the women surrounded. Everybody run!"

THEY RAN as though all hell came after, but now, with the trap broken, the warriors became concerned each with his own safety. The group diminished in number at every exit from the main passageway. They left in ones and twos until only a single pair of courageous warriors remained to guard Nona and Varna.

"A world of cowards," Brian muttered. "Has it sagged too deep into the mud?" They pushed on.

But timidity worked two ways. The attackers also showed marked reluc-

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tance to pursue the savage knife of Brian and the club of Nailon upon which blood and brains were in evidence. The small searching parties they met on the way did not prove any great obstacles. Only one group of six contested the way. They fled, leaving two of their number dead on the floor.

The party moved at a slower rate now with no forces pressing from the rear. And Varna came up beside Brian with deep concern mirrored in her eyes. "Brian! This is not the way out of the building! Where are we going? *Where are we going, Brian?"*

"To the room where you keep the heart machine."

"Why? Why are we going there?" The fears in her voice were those she did not dare put into words. And even when Brian did not answer, Varna still could not ask the question; the question uppermost in her mind. "Are we going there to seek sanctuary?"

Sanctuary? Of course. The aryans would do no fighting there. It was the holy place. The sacred altar. Brian laughed. "That's right. We must find a place of safety."

She sought to stop, but Brian took her arm and pulled her on. She did not struggle against him. The struggle was within her; a battle of the mind. "Why do I do this? Why have I let you trap me and hold me helpless—when I hate you so much. A murderer—a mad egoist—an insane destroyer. Why do I do it?"

"You've got your emotions mixed, darling. They say that sometimes love and hate are the same. It takes time to understand them."

"Lorento will kill you," Varna said. "I hope he kills. I hope I can watch him do it."

"Maybe we'll all die," Brian said. "When a world shakes off two thousan years' lethargy, there is bound to be trouble."

"I will gain in courage," Varna replied. "Soon I'll be able to kill you myself."

LORENTO waited in the machine room. Perhaps there was prophecy in his thinking. Maybe he knew the low caliber of his fighters and felt Brian would win through but would not leave the building. Or possibly Lorento was in the great room to protect the heart machine from the tribesmen assembled outside; to protect it from mass ignorance.

Brian and his group came out on a balcony overlooking the vast arena of machinery. Lorento was seated at his instrument table. Brian called out, "This is a showdown, Lorento. But maybe we can prevent riot and bloodshed."

The tall leader of the aryans stood up and folded his arms. His voice was cold. It radiated contempt. "You stupid upstart! From whence do you gain the right to call for a showdown on anything?"

"If we settle this between us, no one else need get hurt. How about bare hands?"

Lorento smiled. "You have no chance against me. I don't know who you are or where you came from, but you'll be hauled out as carrion and tossed to the animals on the prairie."

"What weapons do you prefer?"

"If you'll come down off that balcony I'll strangle you with my bare hands. Otherwise I'll come up after you."

Brian vaulted some ten feet to the top of a shining cylinder and thence to another platform and the open area beside the great tube which was the center of the machine. Lorento shed a loose cape he was wearing and came forward with a fixed smile on his face.

"Before we start," Brian asked, "will you stop the heart machine?"

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A look of genuine surprise came to the other's face. "You *are* mad, aren't you?"

"The world has come to the end of an era. Man's crutch must be destroyed. So long as it exists there can be no progress."

"If it stops there can be no world. It keeps men's hearts beating, you fool!"

"That may be true, but I know what must be done."

"A maniac," Lorento sneered. "But fortunately a weak one."

"You beat me once before, but maybe I wasn't trying very hard. We'll see."

Lorento waited with a fixed smile on his face. Brian moved in slowly. When he got within range of Lorento's right fist, it lashed out like a piston. Straight and true, it landed flush on Brian's jaw.

Brian went down to slide backward over the polished steel floor. The room spun around and he shook his head to clear it of shock. Then he got up and moved in again.

"Don't you know you can't beat me?" Lorento asked. "Or should I expect a maniac to know anything."

Again Brian came within Lorento's range. Again the fist shot out. But this time Brian's jaw wasn't there. He had dropped into a crouch like a runner awaiting the signal gun. Now he plunged forward, his shoulder crashing against Lorento's thigh. Lorento went down and while he lay outstretched—during that brief moment of helplessness—Brian moved like a cat to clamp an armlock on the aryan; to brace his foot into the small of Lorento's back and gain deadly leverage.

The arm came around with a jerk that sent a spasm of pain through Lorento's body, the pain washing all color from his handsome face. He set his teeth and struggled against the leverage but into an agony that brought sweat to his face.

"Will you stop the machine?"

"No," and Lorento, with amazing skill, turned a complete somersault to clear his arm and jerk free. He lashed out with his left and caught Brian off-balance, but before he could get to his feet, Brian had brought him down again. And again the armlock before Lorento could ward off the hold.

"Will you stop the machine?"

"No."

"I'll break your arm."

"No."

"Damn you! Do it! Do what has to be done! Don't make me maim you for life."

"I'll never stop the machine!"

THE MAN was in agony and Brian could only admire his courage. It was a rare thing in the beaten and broken world. In a frenzy of desperation, he released the arm and twisted Lorento onto his back. He slammed a fist into his face. "Will you stop the machine?"

Blood spurted from Lorento's mouth. "No."

Brian's fist went down twice more. "Will you stop it?"

Lorento's shell of courage cracked. He raised an arm to protect his face and said, "I couldn't if I wanted to. The machine was not made to stop—ever. It was built to endure through eternity. There is no mechanism for stopping it. The atomic pile underneath is eternal."

The silent audience saw Brian get wearily to his feet. But they saw too that the fight was gone from Lorento. In a place and time where fighting was obsolete, unheard-of, he had not the rock-hard spirit for continued combat.

Brian wiped a dribble of blood from his own chin and looked up at the great tube. Possibly, at this moment, he wasn't sane. Something larger than he, stronger than he, had taken hold

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of him. Something that set up a frenzy within him at the possibility of defeat.

The steel bar probably gave him the idea. It was lying nearby, against a railing, and was evidently used in some way relative to the machine.

Brian snatched it up. "Then it's got to be this way," he cried, and hurled the bar straight at the great tube.

As the steel sailed through the air, an agonizing, concerted cry went up from the watchers; a wordless sob of terror, ringing through the vast room.

Then the bar struck. It smashed through the heavy glass of the tube and a flash of blue light flared from the wound. Brilliant, eye-tearing light.

Brian, thus blinded, felt a sickening thud on the back of his skull. He went down into darkness as he spun slowly to see the desperate face of Lorento. But the latter was also falling toward the floor, dropping the short steel bar in his hand. Unconsciousness drew a curtain over Brian's mind.

BRIAN AWOKE to a great stillness. He struggled to a sitting posture and looked about him. On the balcony above, he could see the still forms of Nona and Nailon lying motionless in each other's arms. He saw also the battered Lorento seated against a railing. The aryan's head was in his hands and he seemed dazed from great shock.

And there was Varna, walking, pale and reeling, toward the place where Brian sat. As she came close, Brian saw other bodies lying as in death about the room.

Varna stared down at him, her eyes glazed. "You've killed them. You killed them all. The tribes—all the people. You've ended an era. You've ended everything."

"No."

"Come with me."

Brian got to his feet and followed Varna. The latter walked with a slow, measured step, like a zombie on some ghoulish errand. "Come this way."

She led Brian to a window from which he could look out over the prairie when the tribes had assembled. There were bars over the window and he grasped them in a sudden frenzy of emotion.

No—no! This was not the way it should have happened. This was the wrong-end product of an inspired and glorious act. But it was truth. Out on the prairie lay a hideous mass of truth.

Thousands of still, pitiful bodies. Human debris pilled in heaps, lying in windrows like grain cut down with a sickle.

"Dead," Varna intoned. "All dead. No living thing in all those miles from ocean to ocean. You've killed them by killing the power by which they lived."

"But you're alive—and Lorento." But Brian's voice was muffled as though he strangled upon the horror he'd brought to pass.

"We are stronger than the others—we of the great building. There are a few others still alive and wandering about. But we are so few—so very few."

"What drove me on?" Brian asked of the silent open prairie. He looked out through the window at the thousands of still bodies and asked, "What madness took over my heart and soul to make me commit a deed like this?"

"I should have killed you that first day."

"How do you kill people?" Brian asked. Not that he cared but he feared the great silence.

"I should have had you put into the lead box and destroyed."

"Oh that. It wouldn't have killed me. The pols put me into a lead-lined box."

THEIR CONVERSATION was weird, childish, seemingly without motivation or sense. "That's right,"

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Varna said dully. "It wouldn't have killed you. How thoughtless of me."

"But you couldn't have brought yourself to do it. You are in love with me."

Varna's expression did not change nor was there the least weight of expression in her voice. "Love you? You fool. I hate you." She turned and walked away.

Walked away, and above her, on the balcony, Brian saw a movement—the stirring of a body—Nona's body. He turned his head and looked again through the window. He called, "Varna. Come here."

She turned like an automaton and retraced her steps.

"They are moving," Brian said. "Look out the window."

It was true. Here and there, from the heaps of prone bodies strewn as by the wind, was rising a single form, then another and another. The hardier first-risers stood swaying and looking about them. They seemed bewildered and stunned as they watched other bodies stir and the whole prairie come slowly to life.

"They're getting up," Brian said dully, and, with the same dull voice, Varna replied, "Yes. They are getting up."

She turned and called out to Lorento. "Come here and look out the window."

Lorento got up and did as he was bidden. He looked out over Brian's shoulder and said with the same eerie lifelessness. "They're getting up."

"Getting up," Varna echoed.

Brian confirmed it. Three zombies making conversation. "That's right. They're getting up."

He turned and looked at the balcony. Nona was helping Nailon to his feet.

ALL WAS color and activity on the prairie surrounding the great building. Brian watched the ebb and flow of life and he sensed in this multitude a change—a vast awakening. The signs were still faint but unmistakable. During the night there had been three fights between individuals of the different tribes.

There will be more fighting as they come slowly to the realization that a new day has dawned; that the stagnant peace is over; that fighting is a part of progress. But that other things are a part of it too; living justice; honest striving; the thrill of blood coursing swifter through veins long stagnant, stagnant as the sick peace of two thousand years. The artificial heart has been smashed but the great heart of the world surges with renewed life.

Disagreement, battle, compromise—*progress.*

Brian turned back to his horse and tightened the cinch beneath his belly. He straightened the stirrup and tested it with his foot.

"Where are you going?" Varna wore britches and a blue blouse open at the neck. She had come to him quietly from the building.

Brian shrugged. "Somewhere to make a place for myself in this new world."

"That will be nice. What will you do?"

"Hunt, trap, start a blacksmith shop, buy and sell real estate, become a miner—who knows?"

He hadn't seen her since the fight in the heart machine room.

Varna said, "Brian, I wonder if you realize how rude and inconsiderate you really are?"

Something warmed inside him as though the words were an echo from long ago; words from a world and a way of life long dust.

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Jennifer.

Brian grinned. "I thought you hated me."

"You make me so mad! You come here and wreck my life—wipe out my excuse for being. Then you climb on your horse and ride away again! Who do you think you are, Brian Courtney?"

"They called me a wildcat tamer in the old days. Climb up."

He reached down and swung her into place behind the saddle.

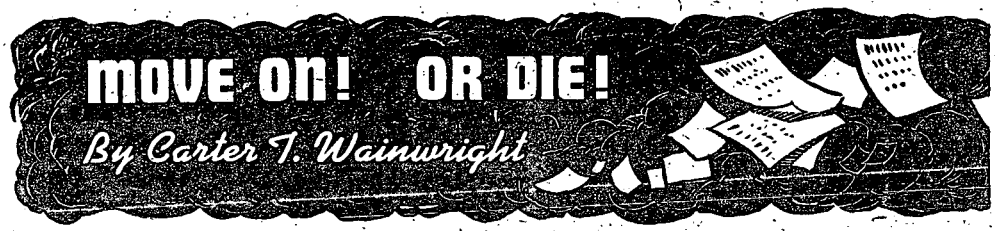
She clung tightly to him and said, "If you think for one minute you're going to take me out into the wilds somewhere and—"

He twisted around. "Kiss me, woman!"

"I'm damned if I will." Then their lips met and Varna was whispering, "Damn you—darling. I'll—I'll make you miserable for the rest of your life!"

Brian leered familiarly at the breath-taking lines under her blouse and dug his heels into the horse's flank. Varna clung tightly to him as they galloped off over the prairie.

THE END



THE INITIALS "RW" are coming to the lips of scientists and military personnel with increasing frequency. They stand for "radiological warfare" and in a way offer a solution to the ever-present problem of war—by making war impossible! This sounds contradictory—in fact, if anything, the articles written on future radioactive warfare have painted it as hideous beyond conception, even worse than direct atomic bombardment. A national weekly undertook to re-examine the picture of what might happen with radiological warfare and came up with a surprisingly sound idea—in essence, RW may make war impossible.

Suppose (the weekly said) that an enemy sent planes over our large cities, perhaps over just one city at a time. No bombs would be dropped, but instead a fine dust would be ejected, along with huge bundles of paper leaflets. One would explain the other. The next morning the citizens would pick up these leaflets and read some cold, clear statements which would either cause them to react as cooly or send them into a panic.

The leaflets would say: "Attention: Your city has just been bombed and strewn with radioactive dust. Within one week, it will be absolutely uninhabitable for the next year. If you remain in the city for any longer than a week you will sicken and die according to these symptoms (here would follow a description of radioactive illness). You are directed then to leave the city at once if you desire to live. There is simply nothing else for you to do. These facts will be verified by your scientists. *Desert the city at once!*"

An easy check with instruments would then show that the enemy had made good his boast and that it was imperative for people to leave the city within the span of a week or be doomed. You can imagine what would happen. Even assuming no panic, the city would have to be evacuated and great confusion would result. Not to mention the problem of housing and feeding and employing the millions who would be forced to go.

Such an attack is perfectly possible. It need cause no deaths, and it would leave the cities perfectly intact, unharmed after a definite period of time, but incapable during that time of operating as economic units, producing weapons, etc. One by one the major cities of a country could be knocked out, and nothing could be done apart from possible retaliation in kind.

Of course radioactive poisons of immediate virulence could be used also. But these would defeat the very objective desired by the enemy, the non-destruction of the cities. With all major combatants capable of creating these radioactive drugs—and even nations which cannot build atomic bombs can build radioactives—warfare as we know it might have to come to a halt. Peace might simply be a necessity to survival. Certainly any nations planning a future war will have to take into account these strange weapons. Perhaps war has come to its full cycle, now being simply so destructive (in an unusual sense) that no one can engage in it. Perhaps too the radioactives are the "ultimate" weapon!

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THE BATTLE OF THE BUCCANEERS

A "fantastic" Vignette

By E. Bruce Yaches

BEING a patrolman in the Asteroid Belt is not the System's most glamorous job. I push my vessel, little bigger than a commercial liner's lifeboat, on routine courses, checking on a radar-pulse beacons, occasionally help out a miner, like running a sick man into Ceres I—and in general do little necessary jobs like that. The awesomeness of space wears off fast and the only thing left to do is study—at the rate I'm going I'll be an expert in everything.

I was moving along at maybe ten centimeters' acceleration when I first saw the damaged lifeboat. I braked away my kinetic energy with a nose blast and pulled up to lock to the stricken craft. It was a wreck. It looked as if it had badly sheered itself in passing through an air-lock and the stern was riddled with holes suspiciously like those made with an automatic gun of some sort.

You don't expect to find life aboard something like that, so my eyes nearly popped out of my head when I opened the lock and stepped aboard. A spacesuit was all that kept the girl alive, for the air was gone and through the helmet I could see she'd taken a nasty bump on the head. I hustled her aboard the patroller and got the suit off her. She came around quickly enough. The initial fright left her face when she learned she was aboard a patroller. Her name was Elena Graff and she was a stewardess aboard the freighter-liner *Cain*. Holding a cigarette in her still trembling fingers she told me what had happened.

"...They boarded us after a big shoot-up, Lieutenant," she said, "and you know how those things go." Momentarily her eyes dropped to her torn uniform—where mine had been all the time—and she went on. "I suppose they're after the uxan ore and whatever drugs the ship carried. We had half a dozen women besides myself aboard." She shuddered. "I still don't know how I managed to tear away from that monster. I got into a boat and nearly wrecked it getting away. They almost caught me, as you saw. But somehow..."

"This couldn't have happened more than a half hour ago," I said. "That gives me time to do something. I won't break radio silence, just in case they're monitoring. But we'll give them a shoot they won't forget."

Watching my scanner closely and with the help of the vectors of the escaped lifeboat I plotted a course. It was only a matter of minutes before we were on them. The freighter-liner was cut up badly about the stern tubes and three small pirate vessels lay alongside. I could clearly see the transfer of containers going on.

I beamed 'em a surrender call. There was no answer for a moment, just a lot of bustling around and then a rifle in a turret aboard one of the pirates swung in our direction. That was foolish. I was glancing down the sight and I had the ship lined up. Running axially down my boat was a hundred-millimeter cannon with recoil blocker. I pressed the firing key. There was a flash of light and the explosive projectile blew the turret neatly from the pirate.

In quick succession I dumped a half dozen shells into the clustered pirate ships. Before they were wrecked they managed to put a light shell through my hull, but we could do without air momentarily; spacesuits take care of that. My transmitter had already contacted base and it would be only a short time before a cruiser would come out and pick us all up. All I had to do was sit tight and prevent any boats from escaping. And they wouldn't be likely to try it with a hundred-millimeter targeting on them.

"Elena," I said to the girl watching the quick fray breathlessly, "that's it. This'll mean an Ionian visit for the next few days—arraignment and reports, et cetera. I'll have time on my hands too."

"Then we both won't have any to waste." I placed a spacesuited hand over hers....

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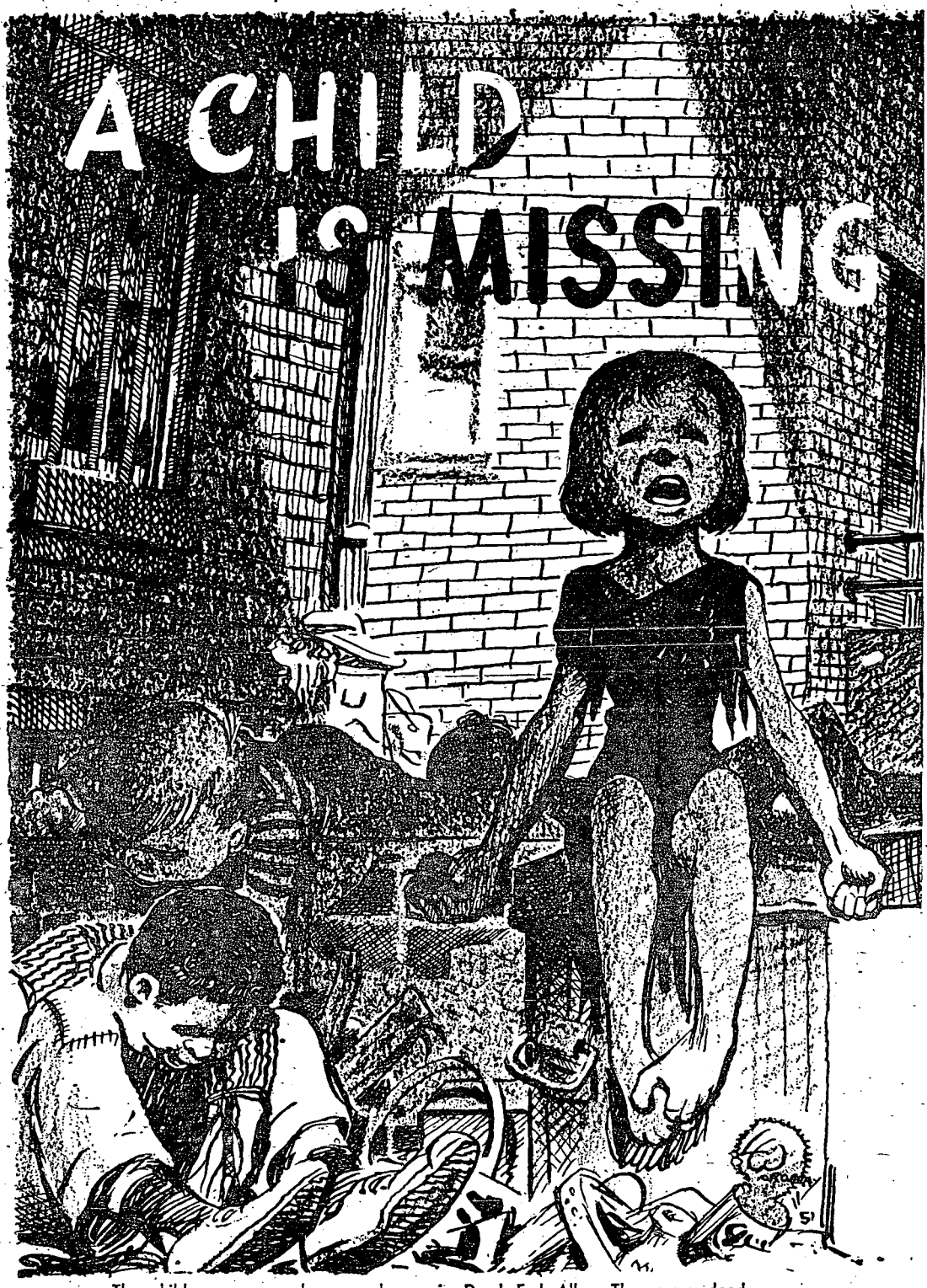

The children were no longer unhappy in Dead End Alley. They were dead.

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By Paul W. Fairman

Usually, a pat on the head is a gesture of fondness. But try telling this little boy you love him, and you wind up—dead!

THE CHILD was about four years old—certainly not more than six. As he passed along the street, many people smiled at him because obviously, clad as he was, he planned to attend some youngster's party where outlandish costumes would be the order of the day.

In attendance also would no doubt be several Hopalong Cassidys, a fairy queen or two, and possibly a Buck Rogers with his space pistol and outlandish rig.

This little boy wore a costume which could hardly be classified with any of these. It could have been a

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mother's idea of a space costume—a mother who had no time for reading the comics. It was of gold cloth and bore a wealth of meticulous stitching.

So the little boy walked along the street and people looked at him and smiled. He walked a goodly distance before one elderly woman—more perceptive than the rest—noted the fear and uncertainty in the child.

Fear? Terror was a more accurate word. At a glance she read the truth. A lost child. An infant in an agony of uncertainty and bewilderment at this unfamiliar place through which he passed.

The woman stopped, then turned and followed the little boy. He was walking slowly and she saw that at intervals he raised his hand as though to place it in that of an adult—a father, a mother. But no hand reached forth to take his.

A lost child.

The woman's relatively longer strides lessened the distance between them until she could reach forth and touch him, saying at the same time, "Are you lost, little boy?"

She spoke softly as she had had children of her own and knew what panic could be engendered in a young mind. Her hand settled lightly on his shoulder.

The child whirled like a trapped animal. An articulate cry came from his lips. He pushed sharply at the woman, then turned to flee—a perfect picture of wild, infantile terror.

But the woman did not hear his cry, nor did she see him whirl away down the street, because she was dead. The life went out of her like power out of a disconnected wire. An instantaneous thing. She wilted to the sidewalk and lay quite still, the red cherries on her hat looking for all the world like gobs of blood; blood darker than that which stained her dress.

HOMICIDE got it because it looked like murder. Homicide sent Bill Stark to look things over. The wound was a peculiar one. It could have been caused by a spent bullet. Bill Stark didn't think so, but while things were hot he visited likely places up and down the block, thinking maybe some lame brain might have fired a gun out the window.

Then, examination showed no bullet inside the woman's body and the theory had to be changed. An inexpert knife wound perhaps—some quiet maniac wielding a knife quickly and then slipping away into the crowd.

And a maniac it would have to be. Certainly there was no motive for the brutal killing. An elderly woman without an enemy on earth. Stark checked doggedly for a motive and found none.

Witnesses were also hard to find. Many people saw the woman after she fell to the sidewalk. Most of them thought she had fainted—had had a stroke—had passed out from the heat.

Any suspicious persons close to the woman? None who could be remembered by anyone on the scene of the tragedy. Bill Stark asked questions and went through all the motions. But he got nowhere.

THE LITTLE boy wandered on through the city. At times he sobbed to himself, a curious singsong wailing which was the perfect epitome of sadness and grief. He seemed not capable of taking his troubles to an adult passerby. In fact, he seemed to interpret their smiles as threats. It was almost as though he had been forbidden, by some authority, to go forth from home in the strange costume; as though he classed all grownups as stern disciplinarians.

He gradually worked away from the busy sections of the city—down into

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the tenements and even beyond—toward the railroad tracks and the dumping grounds.

A little girl slightly older than he, filthy and happy, wearing a shapeless dress and without shoes or stockings, greeted the boy as he crept into an alleyway to rest.

She was sitting on a recessed garbage can eating an apple and he did not see her at first—not until she smiled and said, "Hello. My name is Elizabeth. The man in the store gave me this apple."

The boy whirled as before, in pure panic, and his hands went out in the same pushing motion. But something—something within him—was retarded at the last moment, it seemed. He took a step backward, another. He stood poised, ready to sprint away, yet not quite wishing to.

The little girl held forth her apple and continued to smile. "You can have a bite. What's your name? Did you just move around here? I live on Fowler Street. My mother works sometimes in the restaurant."

The boy said nothing, but he appeared to gain in confidence. He retrieved the backward step and his expression turned from fear to deep, questioning seriousness.

The girl took another bite of the apple and held it forth again. "You're funny. You don't talk."

The boy looked at the apple. His eyes said he was terribly hungry.

"You can have a bite," the girl repeated. "There—on the red side."

The boy opened his mouth, revealing gleaming white teeth. He set the teeth into the apple. The girl twisted it expertly and he had his bite. He mouthed it experimentally.

Then pandemonium—swift and terrible—hit the alley.

It came with a group of four dirty-faced boys ranging in age from that of the girl up to perhaps fourteen. They had come quietly, on tiptoe, into the mouth of the alley, and now their satisfaction burst forth in shrill yells.

"We got 'er!"

"Crazy Lizzy! We got 'er for sure!"

"Hello, Crazy Liz! We got you like the last time!"

The terror in the boy's face was mirrored even more strongly in that of the little girl. Pure panic was in the cry welling from her throat as she strove to escape the ambush.

The boy, caught in the middle, sought escape also. His cry was deeper, throatier, but no less pregnant with terror. His hands went forward in that odd, thrusting motion—much as a trapped rabbit would kick its legs.

And the joy of the four urchins left them as they died—swiftly, painlessly, instantly—to crumple and lie still on the dirty bricks.

Four dead children in an alley.

The little boy fled like golden light. His sobs fading away as he vanished toward the railroad yard.

The little girl sat cringing on the garbage can, screaming in hysteria.

THEY GAVE Bill Stark that one too. He was tired when he got back to headquarters. His nerves were raw but, even more than that, there was a vast uneasiness within him.

"Of course the little girl didn't do it. Kill four kids? And three of them twice her size?"

"What about her yarn? The other kid in the funny clothes?"

Stark scratched his graying head. "You got me. We probably ought to have a child psychologist give her a going over. Sometimes children that age live in a dream world. This kid in the gold clothes sounds to me like an imaginary playmate they have sometimes."

"Did you find anybody that placed this imaginary kid on the scene when that woman was killed on Beam

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Street?"

Stark nodded in disgust. "Sure, but after they'd all read about the kids dying in the alley and the little girl's story. None of them said anything about it at the time the woman died. I got a hunch we're going to hear about the kid with the golden pants for quite a while."

The intercom buzzed. Stark snapped the switch. "Yeah?"

"2416 Leavitt. Killing in the street."

Stark went out to Leavitt Street and found a grocery clerk who had seen it: "I was putting some groceries in the truck and I see this kid dressed like for a circus over in front of the apartment house. He looks like he's lost sort of—scared, I'd say. He was crouching down and old Hopkins comes up and touches him and looks like he's asking him if he's lost or something. Then old Hopkins spins around and does a kind of loop and goes on his kisser. It's just like somebody shot him."

"Did it look as though the kid did it?"

"The kid? That little squirt? Why he was so scared he busts out bawling and kites up the street. Him kill old Hopkins? Nuts!"

But the same strange wound. A dead man. A dead woman. Four dead children.

A frightened child.

Stark went back to the station. He said, "Look, I'm only a homicide dick. All I know are the old rules that have been good enough up to now. Take me off the case. I think maybe I'm slipping."

Stark had a newspaper with him; an evening paper with an arresting streamer: MAD ASSASSIN STALKS CITY STREETS.

He threw it on the Chief's desk and the Chief said, "The rules haven't been changed. There's something behind all this. You get paid to find out things like this."

"Then let's face it. A five-year-old kid is going around killing people. I've checked and this kid hasn't been inquired for. Nobody's lost him. Nobody wants him."

"Can you blame them?"

"Maybe it's because they aren't alive anymore."

"Be that as it may, we got the city's safety to think about. Anybody that walks up to this kid stops living. Does that suggest anything?"

Stark sat down and shook his head in disgust. "Yeah. A radio bulletin. Tell them this: A five-year-old child is roaming the streets of our city. If you see him, notify the police. He is armed and dangerous. This child appears—"

"—TO BE LOST and bewildered. But do not under any circumstances offer him aid or comfort. Several people have already died for so doing." Thus ran the news flash on the killings.

The announcement hit the city like a bombshell. The leader of the Reform Party called a special meeting of the party leaders. After an hour-long conference, he went on the air with a scathing denunciation: "Our corruption-riddled police department has gone from the inefficient to the ridiculous. Unable to solve a series of murders, they have dreamed up as sublime a fairy tale as it has ever been our privilege to hear. They are blaming the murders on a child! This demonstrates the depths into which the present administration will stoop in order to seek escape from the consequences of their maladministration, etc., etc., etc."

The head of the Reform group smiled as he left the mike. One of his underlings said, "Swell speech, Boss, but I been thinking. It's kind of a funny gag for them to pull. What if

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there is such a kid?"

"Ridiculous. We're going to form an unofficial posse among the honest citizens of this town. We're going out and either find this child or prove he does not exist. This is our big opportunity, and we mustn't muff it."

Strangely enough, it was the thoughtful underling who found the child—hiding behind a pile of boards in a lumber yard. The minor politician's flashlight caught the glint of the bedraggled gold costume; caught also the look of sick terror in the child's eyes.

Immediately he lost all faith in the validity of the police department's claim. Obviously it was some gigantic and shameful hoax. The man scowled at the rottenness of a situation whereby a terror-sick child could become the victim of a political machine.

He said, "Come here, lad. Everything's all right now. You're in good hands."

He died as quickly and painlessly as had the others; died as the frightened child spun away from him to run sobbing into the darkness.

Upon discovery of the body, the questionable Reform leader called off the posse and issued a new statement: "It is the job of the police department to protect the citizens of this community. Their inability to do so has cost us the life of an able public servant. Thus is their incompetence proven anew, etc., etc., etc."

THE SHARP edge of the child's terror was wearing away. But from continued agony rather than from any new-found strength. He was weak from lack of food, and a pitiful apathy had fallen upon him.

After leaving the lumber yard, he ran until his strength failed and then found sanctuary in a basement. After entering, timidly, through a broken window, he crept behind an asbestos-covered furnace where he lay in a half stupor, grateful for the heat and the comparative comfort.

After a time he was awakened by the demands of his stomach. He crept forth and explored the still, dark basement. He found the fuel pile; tested the coal in his teeth and discovered it to be unpalatable.

He found a dripping faucet and slaked his raging thirst after a long tortuous time by consuming the meager droplets as they fell.

Then he crept back behind the furnace and fell into a troubled sleep.

And as he slept he dreamed of strange story-book places and of the stories his mother had told him. He dreamed mainly of the place where children go when they are very good. In this place there are many wonderful things to eat—so his mother said. Mountains of brightly-colored food, with rivers running in between filled with sparkling liquids.

In this place was The One, to whom all children say *Please keep me* when they go to sleep, and sing to in gratitude when they awaken. The One always understood children's problems—even more so than mothers—and it seemed to the child that his problem of bewilderment and terror was completely solved by The One.

After a while he awakened. He cried for a while and then slept again.

But never did it occur to him to seek help.

A CERTAIN sanity returned to the city on the following day. True, the dead had not arisen, but no more had been killed. And save for one incident—when a nervous man threw a stone and felled a small boy playing in a yard—things went smoothly.

By nightfall the city had taken the attitude that the crime wave was over and only the solution remained to be

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unearthed. And the belief that a child had done the murders was entirely discounted. The attitude of the city was that of a man who had passed safely through a haunted house in the dead of night—and who had not, of course, believed in ghosts in the first place.

But Bill Stark continued to function with a great weight on his shoulders. The case was still in his hands; the solution still his responsibility. He shrank from what he felt the future held.

Toward evening of the following day, Stark had returned to the station and was scowling at his desk when a call came in. It was routed his way and he heard an excited voice, heavy with a foreign accent: "That kid that was in the papers. You know—the one that kills people. He almost got me!"

Stark's temper was brittle. "Who——the hell are you?"

"I'm the janitor at 918 Ainslie Street. I'm down in the basement just now, fixing the furnace. You know even in the summer we got to have hot water, so I'm fixing the furnace."

"Quit stalling. What've you got to say?"

"I'm telling you. I'm down there and I catch a look at something gold back of the fire box. I look and then jump pretty quick, you bet, 'cause it's that kid you're looking for. He didn't get me, but it was close. I jumped too quick for him, and run out and locked the door. What you want me to do now?"

"Change your pants and wait 'til I get there."

Stark told the Chief. "Okay," the latter said. "Get a squad and high-tail it out there."

"This is the twenty-seventh call on that kid. I don't need a squad. I'll go alone."

"Take a tommy-gun anyhow."

Stark took a tommy-gun and went out to the address on Ainslie street. On the way out, he talked to himself: I'm forty-two years old. I've been a cop for eighteen years. I've met some tough monkeys. I'm a pretty tough monkey myself. So now I'm riding out with a machine-gun to kill a five-year-old kid. I do all right.

The janitor gave him the key to the basement and he went in and closed the door behind him. The janitor waited outside. Before the door closed, the janitor whispered, "That's the furnace there—over near the coal-bin."

Stark turned on him savagely. "I can see it! You think I'm blind?"

A single dust-covered bulb lit the place. It cast faint illumination—huge shadows. Stark stood for a long time, listening, the machine-gun clutched in his hands.

He took a forward step, then muttered, "I'm damned if I will," and laid the tommy-gun down on a work table by the door.

He moved slowly toward the furnace. There was no sound. Another step, another and another. Still he could hear no breathing, no crying.

The soiled gold shone in the dimness. Stark leaned down.

He brought the child out in his arms and vented his misery on the unfortunate janitor. "So you were too smart for him, eh? You overgrown stumble bum! Mark up a big score for yourself. The kid's been dead for hours."

They examined the boy, of course, but there were several things they never discovered: Who he was. From where he came. How he killed so swiftly and so surely. In fact, they didn't find out much of anything.

THINGS were not well on a certain observation ship hurtling back toward Mars. One of the women aboard was in bad shape. It appeared

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she would die.

The Leader and his Second talked the thing over. The Second said, "It was one of the children born on the voyage over. Somehow he got into the auxiliary ship that went down to have a close look at the planet and moored in darkness near one of the cities. The boy got off the ship when it moored and it came away without him."

The Leader shook his head. "How is she taking it? The mother."

"Very badly. I don't think she'll pull through. She's rather frail."

"Too bad. We can't go back, of course."

"Certainly not. Out of the question."

And the Leader made a note in the log on the golden page of that day: *A child is missing.*

Then he wrote in the details.

THE END

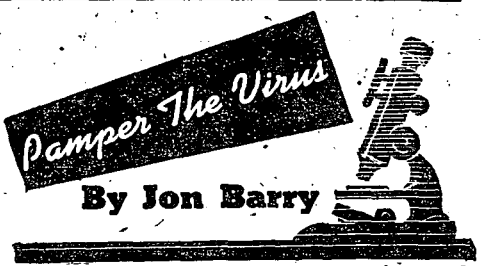
IT WAS RECENTLY released, without fanfare, that Project NEPA has been satisfactorily completed. No further information was available.

That's very interesting, for Project NEPA refers to the phrase and organization "Nuclear Energy for the Propulsion of Aircraft." What has been done? Naturally no one knows exactly, save that the thin line of theory has been drawn in detail. Practice is another thing but you can be sure that the project has taken certain definite lines.

Probably the prime result of the study was the basic development (and its practicability) of an atomic-powered rocket; the simplest form that Nuclear Energy would take for aerial propulsion. Here, the standard method of using a pile or some similar atomic heat producer to expand gases for their thrust value, was planned and studied in theory. Perhaps some actual experiments were made.

The burgeoning success of such power plants for submarines and ships promises that the air too will soon be conquered by the atomic rockets. No doubt the one harassing element in the whole thing is the handling of the exhaust gases and their tendency to poison large volumes of air with fissional radioactive products. This danger seems to offer no out at all except operation in the utmost isolation, say in the Polar areas or some vast desert where Men are not likely ever to go.

It would be interesting, of course, to sit in on a session of the scientists and technical people who worked on the project. It must have sounded like a science-fictionist's maddest dream. That is not surprising, for the world of today's dreams is the world of tomorrow's facts!



THE INSIDIOUS filterable virus which we regard as one of Man's worst enemies, is believed to be the cause of diseases such as polio, influenza, the common cold, etc. So far, attacks made upon virus diseases have been exceptionally unsuccessful. The virus is a resistant body. But science is looking upon this life-form with a realization that it may some day be a greater help than a threat when we learn how to control it! The reason for this is that some of our worst enemies, notably the insect world and the world of bacteria, are afflicted by virus diseases.

A great deal of work is now being done studying the bacteriophage, which is the scientific name for the virus which attacks bacteria. It is believed that eventually this agency, the bacteriophage, will prove more effective than the wonder-drugs in combatting the familiar diseases. Actually viruses and the bacteriophage are similar in many respects, but they are different in two major ones. First, they are much smaller than bacteria, requiring almost an electron microscope for observation. Secondly, the virus is absolutely dependent upon its host for life, which is not true of the bacteria.

If the art of fighting bacteria with the bacteriophage or the filterable virus is ever acquired, we might possibly imagine a world free of disease. This conception is not at all fantastic. In addition the ravishing effects of Man's two great enemies, the rodents and the insects, might at last be successfully controlled by these means. It's sort of a case of fighting fire with fire. The discoveries in the biological and medical sciences that are just around the corner promise to change our lives even more than the physical sciences have done. Virus versus bacteria!

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SPACEMEN DIE HARD

By Chester S. Geier

The pirates, hurled in all directions, dropped their weapons and grabbed for support

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Murphy, ruthless space pirate, was indestructible. Until the day he faced a weapon that could not kill

"ARE you trying to tell me you lost the *Cosmic Dust* to pirates?"

Horace Deggard, president of Tri-World Spacelines, sat in shocked rigidity behind his huge plastolon desk, staring at the trim young rocket pilot who stood before him.

Dave Braden nodded solemnly and waited for the explosion he knew would follow.

For the moment Deggard remained ominously calm. "Just how did it happen?" he demanded. He seemed to crouch at the desk, his beefy hands

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tightened into fists and his massive jaw thrust forward.

"It was like this, sir," Braden began. "I—"

"I know it was like that!" Deggard thundered. "Give me the cold facts, not evasions!"

Braden took a slow breath. "I was returning from the trial flight to the Moon when I received a distress-signal. There didn't seem to be any Patrol ships around at the moment, so I made contact with the sender and asked what was wrong. He told me the rear tubes of his ship had blown out and that the acceleration given it by the explosion was sending it toward the Sun. I got the location of the ship and found it in just the condition described.

"There seemed no reason to be suspicious. I put on a suit and crossed over to the ship, intending to help its passengers aboard the *Cosmic Dust*. And those passengers . . . well, they happened to be a gang of pirates. They overpowered me and took possession of the *Cosmic Dust*, leaving me in the wreck."

Deggard released a noncommittal grunt. "How did you get back?" he growled.

"I called for help with the radio they used to signal me," Braden explained. "After an hour or so I managed to contact a Patrol ship. The officer in charge took me to Earth. I came here immediately after landing. That's about all, sir."

"Who was in command of the pirates?"

"Mournful Murphy, sir. I couldn't be mistaken about that."

"Murphy!" Deggard brought one of his fists down with a crash on the desktop. "That damned thief! He's responsible for almost a quarter of the business I've lost the past year. And you practically make him a present of the *Cosmic Dust*—not to mention the Telecontrol!"

Braden looked away. "I'm sorry, sir, but I couldn't have guessed who was in the wreck. Everything seemed perfectly on the level."

Deggard brought the fist down again. "That makes no difference!" he snapped. "Times are hard enough as it is, what with pirates like Murphy infesting the space routes, and you have to lose a brand new ship and an expensive invention besides. You're sorry—bah! In one stroke you've cost me a couple of million credits. Why, the price of the Telecontrol alone was equal to the entire cost of the *Cosmic Dust!*"

Braden nodded miserably. "If there's anything I can do, sir—"

"Do!" Deggard snorted. "What could you possibly do that the Space Patrol couldn't do a thousand times better? But if you do anything from now on, Braden, it isn't going to be in my employ. You're fired! Now get out of here. If you cross my path again, I'm going to forget there are penalties for committing homicide."

Braden hesitated, then left the office, his face bitter. He knew it would do no good to argue with Deggard. The fact that he was hardly to blame for what had happened was of minor importance; the loss of the money involved counted most.

JOAN WESTLAKE switched off the intercom as Braden appeared in the reception room on his way out. A slender, vivacious girl with chestnut hair and crystal-gray eyes, she was the chief reason why Braden hated to lose his job. As Deggard's secretary, she accompanied the spaceline executive on his frequent business trips, and Braden as pilot had spent his free time in her company during the long journeys which she had made so short and pleasant.

"I heard everything, Dave," the

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girl said softly.

"Then what's the verdict?" he muttered. "Go on, tell me what a fool I am."

"I'm not blaming you, Dave. After all, you meant well, and it just happened to backfire on you. That's not your fault."

"But you can't make the old man see it that way. He expects everyone working for him to be a mind-reader."

Joan grinned wryly. "I know. But the situation isn't hopeless. You'll be able to find another job. There's always a demand for experienced space pilots, and you're one of the best."

He shrugged gloomily. "Sure, there are other jobs. But we won't be together any more, and I won't have much time to see you."

"Does that mean so much?"

"You ought to know how I feel about you, Joan. Those piloting jobs with you along meant a lot to me. Why, I'll never be able to look at another star without thinking of you."

For a moment she stared silently at the papers on her desk. Then she looked up at him, her gray eyes softly serious. "Go and get that other job, Dave. Every time I hear a ship come blasting down, I'll be looking for you."

"You won't have to wait long," Braden said. There was a new vigor in his step, a new determination in his eyes, when he finally emerged from the executive offices of Tri-World Spacelines.

He was joined almost immediately by Jupe Hanlon, a short, muscular pilot with bristling red hair and pugnacious features. The two had served as space cadets together, and Hanlon had been Braden's co-pilot on numerous flights in Tri-World passenger craft.

"What did you go rushing in like that for? Hanlon demanded curiously. "What happened? Where's that new ship you took up to the Moon?"

"Ease up on the throttle," Braden grunted. "I'll explain everything if you'll just give me the time."

Swiftly, he recounted the story he had told Deggard, concluding with the loss of his job. Hanlon was woebegone.

"Hell of a thing, Dave. Working for Tri-World won't be the same without you around.... And about this Mournful Murphy business—it was a trap, that's what. There's rumors that Murphy has spies in almost all the passenger and transport outfits, and I guess this proves it. He got told about the trip you made in the *Cosmic Dust* and decided to grab himself a nice new ship."

"Not to mention the Telecontrol," Braden added. "The device will help him in his holdups and make it even harder for the Patrol to catch him. But, Jupe, I'm hoping Murphy doesn't recognize the invention for what it is. The *Cosmic Dust* was too big to keep secret, but darned few people know about the Telecontrol. The visible part of the gadget is small and buried in a lot of other instruments, and you'd hardly know it was there. So Murphy might miss it completely for a while."

Hanlon peered narrowly at Braden. "Just what have you got up your sleeve, Dave?"

"I don't exactly know myself—yet. There's an idea at the back of my mind that might make the Telecontrol damned important."

"What's this Telecontrol thing, anyhow? What does it do?"

"It was designed to get around the nervous-reaction factor," Braden said. "You know space pilots have to have lightning-fast reflexes and that even the best of us slow down after a while under the wear and tear of landings and takeoffs. When we reach the

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point where our muscles don't react fast enough to nervous impulses from the brain, there's trouble—serious trouble. The Telecontrol cuts muscles out of the picture entirely. It operates the ship directly by thought impulses from the pilot, acting as a sort of supplement to the manual controls.

"The thing really works like a charm, Jupe—but it has one drawback. It can't be used at the same time with the manuals. If it is, the whole control system becomes paralyzed. The delicate relays get all mixed up trying to respond to commands from two directions at once and fuse together. You have to take the whole works apart to make them function again—and you know how dangerous that can be in a gravitational pull."

Hanlon nodded slowly, digesting what he had heard.

THEY CONTINUED in silence along the vast sand-drifted thoroughfare at the edge of the New Mexican spaceport, a city in itself. An almost continuous stream of cars and trucks hummed past in the traffic lanes, and the footways were jammed with bustling humanity. The bright uniforms of spaceship officers contrasted with the tropical whites of Venusian planters, and men in business suits mingled with crewmen, mechanics and stevedores in dungarees and overalls. The hot blue sky overhead was thronged with a variety of craft, from private gyros to gigantic turbo-jet freighters. Far out across the flat stretched in long rows, incoming and outgoing space vessels filled the air with muted thunder.

Hanlon asked abruptly, "What do you figure on doing now, Dave? Get another job?"

Braden had been moving almost blindly through the jostling crowd. Now his eyes cleared and his mouth tightened. "Jupe, I think there's a way to get back the *Cosmic Dust*—and catch Mournful Murphy at the same time. It's worth a try. All I need—"

"Great space, Dave, are you out of your head?" Hanlon burst out. "Trying to tackle Murphy would be sure suicide! He's no fool, even if he does look and talk like a character out of a video comedy. The Patrol's been trying to put him out of business for over a year—and getting nowhere fast. What could you hope to do?"

"I think I've got an opening the Patrol never had," Braden answered quietly. "It all hinges on the Telecontrol device."

Hanlon shook his head. "What you need is a drink. That ought to correct your course."

Before Braden could protest, Hanlon caught his arm and pushed him into one of the many bars along the thoroughfare. As they came through the revolving doors, the coolness of air conditioning hit them like a wet towel, laden with the mingled odors of liquor and tobacco smoke. The big bar room was crowded with spacemen whose loud voices clashed with the rhythmic music blaring from a ten-foot-square video screen in one wall.

Braden and Hanlon found a place at the bar and ordered drinks. While Hanlon stared appreciatively at the shapely legs of the chorus in the video screen, Braden glanced moodily at the faces of the crowd. He was setting down his empty glass when he noticed the tall dark man who stood at the far end of the bar, giving an order to one of the barmen. Something about the tall man struck Braden as familiar. It was the eyes, he realized, then. The eyes were oddly alert and watchful—and they blinked steadily in what was apparently a nervous mannerism.

In another instant, recognition flashed in Braden's mind. He knew he was looking at one of the pirates

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who had been present with Mournful Murphy during the theft of the *Cosmic Dust*. The man had been called Blinky he remembered.

A grim joy shot through Braden. If Blinky was here, then Mournful Murphy was somewhere nearby. And where Murphy was, the *Cosmic Dust* would be also.

Braden shoved an elbow into Hanlon's side. "See that tall guy over there? The one with the blinking eyes. Jupe—he's one of Murphy's men!"

Hanlon peered in the indicated direction. He stuck out his jaw and aggressively straightened. "Well, what're we waiting for? Let's go get the—"

Braden hastily caught his arm. "Wait! Do you want to spoil everything? We'll follow him."

The barman who had waited on the tall pirate named Blinky had moved out of sight through a swinging door. Now he reappeared with two large paperboard cartons, which he lifted over the bar. Blinky paid for these, gulped down the last of his beer, and strode out of the bar room.

Braden and Hanlon followed.

BLINKY walked a short distance to a parking lot, stopping before a sleek black gyro. He shoved the two cartons inside, and then, as he prepared to enter, paused to send a wary glance around him. He saw the purposefully approaching figures of Braden and Hanlon. His eyes fastened on Braden and narrowed with recognition. Instantly he leaped into the gyro, hands fumbling for the controls.

As the two pilots raced forward, there was a whooshing noise from the jets in the tips of the gyro's overhead vanes. The vanes revolved with increasing swiftness, but before Blinky could lift the gyro into the air Braden tore open the door and pulled him away from the controls. Blinky snarled in a mixture of panic and fury and sent a clawing hand inside his jacket. He got an automatic half out before Braden's first punch crashed into his face, numbing him. Swiftly Braden hammered in two more blows. Blinky went limp.

"Quick, Jupe!" Braden thrust Blinky back into the gyro's cabin and pushed Hanlon in after him. Then he slid into the seat before the controls and jerked the craft into the air. A woman who had witnessed the incident was shrilling an alarm, and a group of men further back in the parking lot were running forward. Braden deliberately swung the gyro so that its license plates would be impossible to read.

"Keep your eyes open," Braden told Hanlon. "Those people down there will have a police ship after us in another minute or two."

"What's wrong with that?" Hanlon demanded. "This is a job for the law, isn't it?"

"Not yet," Braden returned grimly. "Right now it's my party." He throttled the gyro to the limit, sent it darting higher like a flushed bird.

Soon overhead traffic was reached, and Braden straightened the gyro out to continue at its legal ceiling. He was sending the craft toward the downtown section of the city. Once lost in the heavy sky traffic there, it would be practically impossible for a police ship to single them out.

They reached the downtown traffic without any sign of pursuit. Satisfied on that score, Braden sent the gyro in a new direction.

"What are you going to do with him, Dave?" Hanlon asked, motioning toward the unconscious pirate.

"We'll take him to our room. He's going to answer a few questions. Better start bringing him around,

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Jupe. We want him using his own jets."

Hanlon already had Blinky's gun. He held this alertly in one hand as he shook and slapped the pirate back to awareness.

Shortly Blinky groaned in protest and opened his eyes. He batted them rapidly as he rubbed his jaw and studied the gun in Hanlon's fist. At last he sat up, his narrow dark face sullen.

"You guys are making a mistake."

"Not any worse than the one you made," Braden said. "Now shut up. If you kick up a fuss, the police are going to get their hands on you. They'd just love that, and you know it. Play this our way, and maybe you'll get a break."

FLYING at a sedate speed, Braden reached the roof landing of the spacemen's hotel where he and Hanlon stayed between piloting trips. He brought the gyro down.

Walking closely on either side of Blinky, Braden and Hanlon marched him into the building. Hanlon kept the automatic, concealed in his uniform pocket, pressed against the pirate's hip. Blinky was unhappy and reluctant, but evidently he had police arrest clearly in mind and considered Braden and Hanlon as the lesser of two evils.

In his and Hanlon's room, Braden ordered the pirate into a chair. "Now we'll get down to business," he said. "Just what are you doing here, at the space port?"

Blinky shrugged. "A little vacation trip, sort of." His tone momentarily grew boastful. "The Patrol ain't so smart it can keep us from jetting right smack down to Earth any time we want to."

"What you mean is that the Patrol doesn't have enough ships to keep you from sneaking past," Braden returned. "Where's Murphy? And where's the ship he stole from me—the *Cosmic Dust?*"

Blinky made a vague gesture. "Somewhere on the Moon, I guess. The chief didn't tell me where he was going after he put me down."

Braden snorted. "The hell he didn't! He wouldn't have taken the trouble and the fuel to put you down unless he meant to come down himself. Where is he? Where's the ship?"

"I don't know, I tell you."

"Quit stalling. Murphy's somewhere around. And so is the ship. You boys aren't the kind who would get too far away from each other, or from your only means of making a run for it in case of trouble."

"Suppose I don't want to talk?" Blinky demanded, his tone defiant.

"Then I turn you over to the police," Braden said. "They'll make you talk, all right. In fact, they'll have to sit on you to shut you up once they get you started. Either way I find out about the ship. But my way you get a break."

Blinky chewed his lip and scowled. "Looks to me like you don't want the cops in on this," he said at last. "You wouldn't tip 'em off about me."

Braden said nothing. He turned to where a videophone unit was set chest-high in one wall of the room. He dialed swiftly, and a moment later the screen lighted. No figure was visible, but the metallic voice of a robot PBX operator spoke.

"Police headquarters. What is it, please?"

"Wait!" Blinky whispered hoarsely, his voice urgent with panic. "Wait, I'll talk."

"Wrong number," Braden said. He switched off the videophone unit and returned to the pirate. "All right, let's have it. And if I think you're giving me anything but a dead-center orbit, I'm going to finish my call. There's

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no reason why I should give you a break if you're not going to give me one."

BLINKY rubbed hard at his long jaw and looked at the weapon in Hanlon's hand, batting his eyes rapidly. He shrugged. "The chief. . . Murphy . . . he's got the ship up in the mountains northwest of here. There's a valley with some Indian ruins in it that he's using for a hideout. He's having a couple of torpedo launchers put on the ship besides the rapid-fire space rifles we brought along from our old tub."

The pirate glanced appealingly at Braden. "If the chief gets his hands on you, don't tell him I gave you all this. You can say you traced him down through the bootleg armaments outfit he does business with."

Braden asked a few questions on this last point, then obtained a book of maps. Blinky had difficulty in pointing out the exact location of Murphy's base, but Braden obtained a description of landmarks in the neighborhood that appeared satisfactory enough.

Hanlon caught Braden's glance as the latter purposefully straightened. "You know I'm with you on this, Dave—but, hell, you can't be planning for us to tackle Murphy alone!"

Braden nodded grimly. "I want to be the one to get the ship back, Jupe. If the Space Patrol did the job, then the Space Patrol would get the credit. The whole thing is risky, I know, but I think we can pull it off. We'll have the advantage of surprise on our side. Murphy and the others will be expecting Blinky's gyro back—and they won't have any reason to suspect he's not in it."

Blinky shook his head. "You ain't got a chance. If you want to commit suicide, you might just as well blow your brains out right here and now. Anyway, I told you what you wanted to know. What do you figure on doing with me?"

"You're going to stay right here," Braden said. "If it turns out that Murphy isn't where you say he is—"

The videophone rang sharply. Braden sent a tense, wondering glance at Hanlon, then gestured toward Blinky.

"Get over against the wall beside the 'phone. That way you'll be out of sight when I answer it. Jupe, you stand behind me and keep him covered."

Braden switched on the visiphone. A moment later, as the screen lighted, he found himself gazing at Joan Westlake.

"Joan!" he said eagerly. "What is it? Has the old man changed his mind about firing me?"

Her answering smile was wistful. "I'm afraid not, Dave. He still feels bad about losing the ship. He did a lot of thinking about it after you left, and it seems he's hit on a plan of some sort for getting it back. I don't know what it is, but I do know he intends making a trip to the Moon. And I'm going along to handle some business matters while we're there. In fact, that's the reason I called. Jupe is to pilot us, and I'm to give him his instructions."

"Give me the details, Joan," Jupe put in.

"We're to leave"—she glanced at her watch—"in four hours. Traffic Control has given us a Priority A-2 orbit, and you're to report to them an hour before takeoff for your flight figures. The ship will be in Scaffold 12—Mr. Deggard's private yacht, the *Martian Maid*." She concluded with the details of the drive pile check-up by the Spaceflight Safety Division.

Jupe nodded and glanced at Braden. "Four hours, Dave. We'll have just enough time to—"

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Braden broke in quickly, "Joan, I have a plan of my own for getting back the *Cosmic Dust*. If it works, you and the old man won't have to make the trip. I'll try to let you know in time. If you don't hear from me, just go ahead with the plans you've made."

She searched his face in alarm. "Dave! What are you up to?"

"I'm going to investigate a certain possibility, that's all. Don't worry, Joan, please." He switched off the screen, making his farewell as casual as he could, even though he knew there was a grave risk that he would never see her again.

He whirled back to Hanlon. "We'll have to hurry, Jupe! I don't like cutting things so fine, but there's no help for it."

Hanlon nodded quickly. "Let's get started, then."

Braden astonished Blinky by ordering him to remove his clothes, a dark traveling suit consisting of a waist-length jacket and trousers with flaps that snap-fastened snugly at the ankles. The suit proved a fair fit on Braden, since it hadn't fitted the gangling Blinky to begin with. Blinky grumbled over his undressed state until he was provided with some odd articles of clothing that Braden took from the closet.

Then, with strips torn from a blanket, Braden tied the pirate in a spread-eagled position on the bed. The latter's bitter protests throughout the process were cut short only when Braden stuffed a gag into his mouth. Finally Braden and Hanlon returned to the gyro on the roof.

DESERT ROLLED away beneath the gyro. Directly ahead mountains thrust their rocky bulks into the sky.

Hanlon lowered his binoculars and pointed. "Over there, Dave! See 'em? Those are the twin peaks Blinky told us about. The valley ought to be somewhere behind them."

Braden peered through the windshield from his position before the gyro's controls. He nodded, the lines of his face tightening. He made a change in course, then spoke with grave deliberation.

"Remember, Jupe, the whole thing depends on timing. We have Blinky's gyro, and I have his clothes. So Murphy and the others will think I'm Blinky—for a few minutes, anyway. In that time I've got to get into the ship. According to what Blinky told us, most of the men will be at the Indian ruins that they're using for living quarters. Only one or two men will be at the ship. I'll land directly between the ship and the ruins, and the idea will be for you to keep anyone from reaching me. The gyro will shield you from gunfire. Once I'm in the ship, I'll dance it around the ruins. You know what that will do."

Hanlon nodded grimly. "I know. The blast from the jets will cook anything it touches." He briefly examined the automatic rifle in his lap. This, together with a supply of gas grenades, had been obtained before leaving the spaceport. Interplanetary travel, creating frontier conditions, had made weapons of all types readily available, though law enforcement authorities publicly frowned on the traffic. It was admitted, however, that in space or in thinly settled areas of the planets circumstances often forced men to become a law unto themselves. In such emergencies weapons were a practical necessity.

The twin peaks passed beneath the gyro, and a moment later a small valley appeared beyond. Braden exclaimed in triumph. At one end of the valley a spaceship stood on its tailfins like a slender, pointed metal tower. A short distance from the ship,

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beneath an overhanging cliff, were adobe buildings, rising on rocky terraces from the valley floor.

"That's the *Cosmic Dust*, all right!" Braden said. "I'd know her lines anywhere."

The valley swiftly grew larger, and Braden sent the gyro slanting toward the ground. He glanced at Hanlon, who was studying the ruins through the binoculars.

"See anyone around?"

Hanlon suddenly nodded. "Couple of men climbing—" He broke off, leaning forward tensely. Then: "Dave—watch it! They've got a couple of anti-aircraft guns up there in the ruins, and they're getting 'em ready for business!"

BRADEN swore and sent the gyro darting to one side. An instant later a series of black puffs of smoke blossomed in the sky. Then more black puffs appeared a short distance away. The guns were making an attempt to bracket the gyro.

Braden maneuvered the craft with a space pilot's lightning-swift skill, jockeying it out of danger. By carefully timed changes in the angle of the overhead vanes, he made the gyro leap and curve, always beyond reach of the exploding shells. Soon the black puffs fell short as he drew beyond range. The valley had dwindled, and the mountain wall lay below.

Braden felt a sick anger, an aching sense of loss. "They had a trap waiting for us, Jupe! They were waiting for us to walk into it. They didn't open fire until they saw that we knew what they were up to."

Hanlon nodded, puzzled and shaken by the narrowness of their escape. "I don't understand it, Dave. How could they have known?"

"Somebody tipped them off—and I think we'll find out who it was when we get back to the spaceport. There's no chance of getting back the *Cosmic Dust* now. We couldn't get past the guns Murphy set up, and before we can send the Space Patrol against him, he'll be ready to take off."

Braden sent the gyro racing back to the spaceport. Shortly he was bringing the craft down to a landing on the hotel roof, and then, with Hanlon hurrying close at his heels, he went grimly down to their room.

Blinky was gone. The strips of blanket with which he had been bound lay scattered over the bed.

Braden sighed wearily. "I had an idea that Blinky was the one who tipped off Murphy. He got loose somehow and used a short-wave radio—most likely a set belonging to one of Murphy's agents here, at the spaceport. This agent angle has been suspected for some time. Murphy would have to have people helping him to obtain supplies and dispose of stolen goods, and short-wave radio would be one way for him to keep in touch with them. And now—"

Hanlon made a sudden, surprised sound and bent to pick up a slip of paper that evidently had been thrust under the door. His forehead wrinkled. "A note from the manager, Dave. We're to call him as soon as we find this."

Braden turned puzzledly to the videophone unit. A moment later the hotel manager's spare, prim face appeared in the screen.

"Ah...Mr. Braden. I have a rather odd incident to report. It seems a young lady called at your room. She heard strange noises, but was unable to obtain an answer to her knocks. She seemed badly worried about the safety of Mr. Hanlon and yourself, and so I took the liberty of opening the door. We found a man trussed up on the bed. He explained that he was a friend of yours, and that while waiting for you, he was over-

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powered by two men who forced their way into the room."

Braden said swiftly, "This man and the girl—what happened to them?"

"He thought you might be in trouble of some sort, and he seemed to know where to find you. The young lady went with him, having become badly alarmed. I had no opportunity to learn if it was a matter for the police, but if there is something seriously wrong—"

"No," Braden said quickly. "It... it's all right. Just a little mix-up. Thanks."

He switched off the videophone in numb despair. "Great space, Jupe, what a mess! Blinky tricked Joan. And if he—"

The videophone rang. Braden stared at it for a wild instant, then reached slowly to switch it on again. He found himself staring at a masked man.

THERE WAS a frozen interval of silence. Then the masked man spoke in a low, rapid voice.

"I'm calling for Murphy. He has the girl. If you want her back again—alive and unharmed—then keep your mouth shut and co-operate."

"What... what do you want?" Braden asked slowly, cold with dread.

"Go ahead with the plans Deggard has made for his trip to the Moon. The only exception is that he is not to be landed, but taken to a point off the Moon where Murphy will be waiting. Now get a pencil and paper and copy down the following flight figures."

Hanlon hurried to obey. The masked man spoke carefully, checked back and finished:

"Remember, co-operate—or you'll never see the girl again. No tricks. Don't tip off Deggard or the Space Patrol."

Braden said anxiously, "What's this all about? What is Murphy planning to do?"

"Never mind," the masked man returned. "Do as you're told, and everything will be all right."

The screen abruptly went dark.

Braden turned slowly to Hanlon. "I think I get it, Jupe. Murphy's planning to kidnap Deggard—hold him for ransom. Deggard's insured against that, of course. But if he learns I was responsible for the circumstances leading up to it—and the facts are bound to come out, one way or another—I'm washed up as a pilot. Finished! Deggard will blacklist me with every spaceline outfit in the business."

Braden's mouth twisted in sudden fury. "Damn Murphy! First the *Cosmic Dust*, then Joan, now this! Jupe—listen! I'm going to be in the ship with you and Deggard. When Murphy shows up—"

Hanlon broke in, "But, Dave, Deggard wouldn't let you come along. If you tried talking him into it, he'd suspect something was up."

"He doesn't have to know I'm coming along," Braden said. "I'm going to stow away aboard the *Martian Maid*." He glanced swiftly at his watch. "We have a little over an hour and a half before takeoff. That'll be enough time to get things ready. Here's what we'll do..."

BRADEN waited in the storeroom at the lowest section of the *Martian Maid*. So far, so good, he thought. He'd had no trouble in slipping aboard. But the difficult part of his plan was yet to come.

Beside him on the rubber-sheathed floor lay a spacesuit and several articles of equipment. He held the spacesuit helmet in his lap, the radio headphones turned on to receive.

Presently a whisper of sound reached him. He quickly lowered the helmet over his head.

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"Dave?"

"Here, Jupe."

"All clear at this end. Come ahead. I have the old man buckled up in the acceleration hammock in his cabin. He doesn't suspect a thing—not yet, anyway."

"All right. Be right with you."

Hastily arranging the equipment to prevent possible acceleration damage, Braden left the storeroom. He climbed upward along the ladder in the narrow well running the length of the ship, which in space became a corridor. In the control room near the nose of the ship, Hanlon already lay in his acceleration hammock, buckling the wide, thick safety straps. Braden grinned briefly at the other as he stretched out on the opposite hammock and hurriedly buckled himself in.

The all-clear signal came from Traffic Control. Hanlon watched the sweep-hand of a chronometer on the instrument panel between the hammocks, then flipped a stud on the master unit held on a swing-arm before him. Graphite dampers were electrically removed from the drive pile, and on the instrument panel lights glowed and gauge needles quivered. Hanlon watched a red indicator move across the face of a dial as enormous heat was rapidly created. He flipped two more studs. The lights blinked now as the metallic fuel was acted upon, converted into an incandescent, heavy gas, expanding, building up enormous pressure. The instrument panel seemed a thing alive.

"Here we go!" Hanlon said. He flipped a last stud.

A low roar became audible in the control room, rising in pitch. The *Martian Maid* began to vibrate and shake.

Through the curving viewport Braden saw a strip of desert and an outline of mountains silhouetted against blue sky. As he watched, the desert slid out of sight beneath the viewport's edge, and the mountains followed it, leaving only the sky. He knew the ship was rising with mounting swiftness, climbing a roaring column of fiery gas toward space. Increasing acceleration began pressing him down into the hammock like a giant hand.

The blue of the sky darkened and became a velvety black as the atmosphere was left behind. The stars became an awesome spectacle, burning with a steady, cold, hard brilliance never seen on Earth; oceans of stars spreading beyond oceans of stars in a bejeweled immensity that numbed the mind with its beauty and scope.

THE CRUSHING acceleration pressure faded as the *Martian Maid* drew beyond the greater part of Earth's gravitational pull. The ship was still accelerating and would continue to do so until allowed to coast without power along the orbit into which it had been thrust. The Earth was a huge blue-green sphere now, misted with silver, and the Moon was a dazzling white globe ahead, its craters and ridges etched in sharp black shadow.

Stiffly, Braden unbuckled his safety straps. "I'd better get back into hiding, Jupe. You know what to do from here on in."

Hanlon nodded as he unbuckled himself also. "Sit tight and play dumb. That's easy, considering what you'll be up against." He gripped Braden's shoulder briefly. "Good luck, Dave. Don't take any more chances than you have to."

They started into motion through the ship, Braden to return to the storeroom, and Hanlon on his way to Deggard's cabin. They half floated as the result of diminished weight; only

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the ship's acceleration now supplied an effect of gravity.

In his hiding place Braden climbed into the space suit. He did not don the helmet immediately, but held it in his lap as he waited. The waiting was the hardest part of it, he thought. He felt the tension building up inside him, felt the moistness of his palms against the helmet.

Presently he found himself floating. The ship's power had been cut, and it was now coasting along in free fall until the growing gravitational attraction of the Moon required deceleration.

The whisper of Hanlon's voice came to him from the helmet headphones.

"The old man's in his cabin, resting up. He doesn't suspect anything yet. It won't be long now. We're getting close to the contact point."

"Let me know when you sight the *Cosmic Dust*."

Silence fell again. More time passed.

Finally an excited whisper came from Hanlon. "A ship ahead, Dave! And it must be the *Cosmic Dust*, because it just started accelerating to match our course and velocity."

"All right, Jupe. Hold tight. They'll get into radio contact with you in another minute or so."

Braden resumed his wait. He felt the quick thuds of his heart and knew he was breathing shallowly and swiftly.

This was it! Everything depended on what would happen within the following minutes.

He couldn't fail again. This time there wouldn't be another chance.

It was now—or never.

DIMLY, THROUGH the headphones, he heard Deggard's alarmed tones, as Hanlon evidently alerted the older man to the presence of the *Cosmic Dust*. Deggard urged flight, but Hanlon pointed out that it would be impossible to build up acceleration in time to escape the pirate's torpedoes. Nor would an appeal to the Space Patrol bring help swiftly enough. Deggard fell silent.

The *Martian Maid* jerked a few times as Hanlon blasted the jets to jockey into position beside the pirate craft. Shortly afterward there was the metallic clatter of magnetized boots against the hull as the pirate boarding party arrived.

Braden slipped the helmet over his head and twisted it into an air-tight fit. Hurriedly completing his remaining preparations, he took up a position beside the storeroom door.

Metal boots began clattering through the ship. One pair approached directly toward Braden.

He was ready. One after another, he released two gas grenades, which filled the storeroom with their invisible, odorless fumes. He was counting on the pirates being too confident to expect resistance of any sort—confident enough to open their helmet face-plates immediately upon entering the ship.

Abruptly the storeroom door opened, and a space-suited figure stepped inside. The pirate held a machine-gun—but his face-plate gaped wide. In another instant he swayed as the gas hit him, then went limp inside his suit without falling. In the absence of gravity or acceleration there was nothing to act upon his mass.

Braden felt a brief surge of triumph. The pirate hadn't had time to give an alarm, and his companions were completely unaware of what had happened.

Braden reached for the machine-gun. Now to mingle with the pirates. The concealment of his space suit would protect him from discovery for the time being—long enough for him

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to go where he wanted to go and reach what he wanted to reach. The suit itself was of regulation design and color, and for all practical purposes was identical to that worn by his pirate victim. He had already tuned his helmet radio to the band being used by the pirates.

"All clear back there, Britt?" a voice asked.

"Back there," Braden decided, could only mean his part of the ship. He grunted an answer in what he hoped was an approximation of Britt's tones.

"All clear."

"Come on, then. The job's finished and we're pulling out."

Leaving the storeroom, Braden moved up the ship's central corridor toward the airlock. A group of figures were gathered there, the majority in spacesuits and gripping weapons. One was roughly helping Deggard into a suit, and the executive was protesting bitterly.

"You thieves!" he growled. "You black-hearted brigands! As if trying to put me out of business wasn't enough, you have to kidnap me besides!"

"Cut your jets," the pirate assisting him advised, "or I'll damn' well cut them for you!"

Deggard subsided into a blasphemous muttering.

ANOTHER pirate was giving Hanlon last-minute instructions.

"... the bank in Moon City. The Tri-World office on Earth will radio an okay. It shouldn't take long. Then get the money in credits of small denomination. As soon as you get it, you'll be told where to make delivery. Understand?"

Hanlon nodded.

"And don't forget," the pirate went on, "stay clear of the Space Patrol. They'll try to get a line on Murphy if they find out about your negotiations. But don't play any games with them. If you try to double-cross Murphy, it's cold jets for the girl and your boss, here."

Hanlon nodded again. Braden realized that the other was being allowed to go free in order to obtain Deggard's ransom money. It was more or less what he had expected would happen.

"All right, boys, button up!" the command came.

Face-plates were sealed, and the air-lock door closed, shutting Hanlon from sight. Braden edged back against the wall, keeping himself hidden behind the bulks of the others as much as he could. He knew that only a direct glance into his face-plate would betray him, but he wanted to guard against even that.

A light glowed as pumps began evacuating the air from the chamber. Then the light went out, and another took its place. The outer door opened. Beyond lay the black, star-gemmed vastness of the void.

A guide-line had been strung out between the two ships. The pirates crossed quickly by means of this, and Braden took his turn without hesitating when it came. Deggard had some difficulty in maneuvering himself along, which resulted in sulphurous curses from the pirate who had been elected to shepherd him—curses which Deggard just as enthusiastically, if breathlessly, answered.

Presently the pirates were gathered within the air-lock of the *Cosmic Dust*. Braden again made himself inconspicuous. His heart hammered rapidly, with a loudness he felt certain must be audible in the headphones of the others. He gripped his machine-gun hard.

The air-lock filled, and the inner door opened. A group of men stood waiting in the corridor beyond.

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Among them were Blinky—and Mournful Murphy.

The pirate chieftain was rubbing his fat hands. Even in this moment of triumph his sagging-jowled, pouchy features had the melancholy expression of a hound dog that had just lost a promising scent. It was this perpetual air of lugubrious sadness that had resulted in his being nicknamed Mournful. He had a large head, covered with shaggy black hair, and a short, heavy-fleshed body. Only his deep-set black eyes, cold, quick and shrewd, belied the sadness of his face.

BRADEN had unobstrusively maneuvered himself so as to be one of the first through the inner door. He stepped into the corridor, keeping his face turned down inside his helmet, so that little more than his eyes were visible. He approached to within a few feet of Murphy. The pirate was looking beyond him, evidently seeking out Deggard. His fat features showed no suspicion of impending trouble.

Braden reached up to unfasten his face-plate, as the others were now doing. His gloved hand momentarily aided in concealing his features. Then a quick leap brought him directly behind Murphy, and he pressed the muzzle of the machine-gun into the pirate chieftain's fat back.

Braden's sudden action had struck with an effect like that of a thunderclap. All movement ceased as the pirates stared at him in amazement.

"What . . . what's this?" Murphy sputtered.

"Easy!" Braden warned, emphasizing his command with a jab of the machine-gun. "Stand still. Don't try anything, or I'll kill you."

Blinky had been peering into Braden's face-plate. He gasped, "Chief—it's him! The guy we took this ship away from. He's pulled some kind of a trick on the boys, and—"

"Shut up, you!" Braden snapped. He jabbed again with the machine-gun as Murphy attempted to swivel his head for a backward look.

"My dear lad!" Murphy wheezed. "Don't be hasty about this. I'm an old man with a weak heart. Let's talk this over."

"I'll do the talking," Braden said.

"Of course, of course!" Murphy returned quickly. "What can I do for you?"

"Deggard first," Braden said. "Over here—beside me."

The executive pushed his way forward. "You!" he growled at Braden. "How in space did you get here? Just what do you think you're trying to do?"

"Later," Braden insisted. "Back me up or we lose this chance." To Murphy, he went on, "Now the girl. Have her brought here—quick!"

Murphy sent a few curt words at Blinky, and the tall pirate started down the corridor with a worried scowl.

"Just the girl," Braden reminded him. "And no tricks. I'll kill Murphy the instant you try anything."

"Ah . . . kindly keep that in mind, Blinky," Murphy added with an anxious wheeze.

With part of his mind Braden had been tensely aware of the pirates grouped near the air-lock entrance. He had been careful to keep hidden behind Murphy's bulk as a precaution against being fired at. Now he ordered the pirates back into the air-lock and told Deggard to fasten the door.

"That's better," Braden said in some relief. He prodded Murphy into turning around. "How many others are there in the ship beside the men in the air-lock?"

Murphy's expression was one of deep woe. "Just the pilot, me, Blinky and the girl."

"Girl?" Deggard said. "Say, it

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can't be—"

Braden nodded. "Joan."

"But Hanlon told me she had suddenly taken ill and couldn't make the trip."

"Murphy's men kidnaped Joan back at the spaceport," Braden explained. "By threatening to harm her, they forced Jupe to pilot you to this point in space. I thought I might be able to get you and Joan clear, and so I stowed away aboard the *Martian Maid*."

"Young fool!" Deggard growled. "You may be the death of all of us yet."

"I think our chances are good. As soon as Joan is with us, I'm going to the control room. And then—"

TWO FIGURES had appeared in the corridor—Joan and Blinky. The girl released a cry of incredulous delight as soon as she was close enough to recognize Braden's features behind the open face-plate of his helmet.

"Dave! Dave! How did you—"

Blinky and Murphy both moved very suddenly. A signal had been exchanged between them which Braden, with his attention on Joan, had not caught. Blinky had been moving almost directly behind the girl, and Murphy, since turning, had been standing several feet from Braden.

With a hard, swift push, Blinky sent Joan flying squarely into Braden. In almost the same instant Murphy darted to one side to escape possible fire from Braden's machine-gun. But Braden had no opportunity to fire, even if he could have done so without the danger of hitting Joan. The force of her collision with him sent him sprawling.

Before Braden could untangle himself from Joan, Blinky darted forward and caught at the barrel of the machine-gun, trying to twist it from Braden's hands. Braden hung on grimly. The struggle dislodged Joan, and he was able to spring fully erect.

Murphy had not been idle during these few seconds. He had whirled to the air-lock door and was fumbling to unfasten it.

In his spacesuit Braden was at a disadvantage against Blinky. Deggard, however, came belatedly to his aid, and he was able to free one gloved hand. He balled it into a fist and sent it crashing into Blinky's face. The tall pirate's grasp on the machine-gun loosened—but it was too late. Murphy had the air-lock door open now, and his henchmen were crowding eagerly into the corridor.

Braden knocked Blinky aside with another blow. Desperation a wild drumming inside him, he sought to bring the machine-gun into line. Then hands were clutching at his arms as Murphy's henchmen tumbled toward him, and he went down under a surge of bodies.

Someone twisted his helmet off. Fists thudded briefly into his face, and then a gun butt smashed down on his head. The world went dark.

BRADEN returned to consciousness with the feeling that a drive pile flamed and roared within his head. He became aware of gentle fingers against his face.

"Dave, can you hear me?" a soft voice asked.

"Young fool!" a deeper voice growled.

Braden got his eyes open with an effort. He saw Joan leaning over him and realized that his head was pillowed in her lap. Deggard sat hunched against a wall a few feet away.

"Hello, everybody!" Braden tried to sound more cheerful than he felt.

"Bah!" Deggard snorted.

"Dave!" Joan said. "Are you all

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right?"

He gingerly touched his features, their battered condition making itself known by a dull aching. "I'm alive, and nothing seems broken." Then full memory came back to him with a rush. He struggled to a sitting position and glanced around the small, bare room. "Where are we?"

"On the *Cosmic Dust,* of course, Dave. In one of the compartments near the stern."

"And still in free fall," he said thoughtfully.

"Not quite," Joan said. "Jupe had started accelerating the *Martian Maid,* and Murphy had to match course and speed in order to take aboard the man who had been left behind when you took his place. I heard Murphy and the others talking about it before we were locked up in here. Now, it seems, we're bound for a hideout of some sort on the Moon."

Braden gazed at the girl in sudden sympathy. "I found out how you happened to fall into Murphy's hands. How have you been treated?"

"Not so badly, Dave. Murphy has tried to be friendly—a little too friendly." She hesitated and shuddered. "I...I'm afraid of him!"

"He's a monster!" Deggard burst out. He glared at Braden. "And it's all your fault that he got his hands on us. You started the whole chain of incidents that led to this."

"Please," Joan said. "Laying blame won't do any good now. And, after all, what Dave tried to do was for the best."

Deggard relapsed into a throaty muttering.

Braden squeezed the girl's hand. "With that kind of support, I just can't let you down. If there's a way out, I'll find it."

A moment later footsteps sounded beyond the compartment, and the door opened. Flanked by Blinky and another man, Murphy entered warily. All three held ready weapons. Blinky, Braden noticed with satisfaction, had a black eye and a split lip as a result of their brief struggle near the air-lock.

Murphy's black eyes fastened on Braden. His habitual expression of melancholy was touched with malevolence.

"Ah, my dear lad, awake, eh?" Murphy said gently. "I'm glad to see you awake. It distresses me to think of how much time is lost in unconsciousness. Life is short enough as it is. And in your case, my dear lad, I'm going to make it even shorter."

Braden felt Joan tremble beside him. He and the others had risen at the entrance of the pirates.

"I'm an old man," Murphy went on, still gently. "Old and feeble. And you used me roughly, my dear lad. I'm not accustomed to being used roughly."

Abruptly Murphy stepped close to Braden. The muzzle of his weapon jabbed warningly into Braden's middle, and with his free hand he lashed out again and again at Braden's face.

DAZED, Braden reeled back. As though from a distance, he heard Joan's indignant protest and Deggard's angry tones. Murphy silenced them, centering his attention upon Joan.

"Ah, such tender concern! I think I would find it pleasant to be the object of such affection. Perhaps you could show a like interest in me, Miss Westlake. Frankly, I have taken quite a fancy to you. I always admired girls with spirit."

"I'd rather die than touch you," the girl flashed back.

"I'm sure you could be...persuaded," Murphy returned calmly. "In fact, I'm sure you could be made to

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beg for the chance."

Braden said in alarm, "Leave her out of your plans, Murphy. You already have enough for one man. You have the ship. You have Deggard, here. And you have the"—he sought frantically to cover up what had almost been a fatal slip—"the psycho-scope."

"Psycho-scope . . . ." Murphy echoed. "What—"

Blinky excitedly broke in, "Chief, he must mean that gadget in the control room we've been beating our brains over!"

Murphy's black eyes lighted, even while his mournful expression deepened. "Ah, now that is interesting. Very interesting, indeed. It seems, my dear lad, that you possess certain information we've been wanting. Just what is this pyscho-scope, and what does it do?"

Deggard said, "But there isn't—"

Braden quickly shook his head. "It's no use trying to hold it back now. The news was bound to come out sooner or later."

Murphy jerked his gun in a commanding gesture. "Ah, my dear lad, come, come! I'm dying with curiosity. I wouldn't like to kill anyone to satisfy it."

"The psycho-scope," Braden said, "is a new invention. It was being kept a secret until we knew just how well it worked. I made a special flight in this ship to find out. It worked, all right—worked like a charm.

"The psycho-scope works on a principle something like that of radar, only it sends out thought waves instead of radio waves. The thought waves are reflected from objects and received mentally, giving the operator a clear mental picture of space conditions for thousands of miles around. That's something our present instruments can't do. Most of the time you don't know an object is nearby until it's dead in your path—or until it hits. But with the psycho-scope you know exactly what's there—meteors or other ships—and you know in enough time to prevent a collision."

"This psycho-scope is something I've needed for a long time," Murphy said, satisfaction in his tone. "Something to tell me where to avoid Patrol ships and where to find nice fat transports. If it works as you say it does, then I'll be able to go into business on a really large scale."

"It works, there's no doubt about that," Braden said confidently. "But there's a trick to it. You have to know just how to concentrate."

"You'll explain all about that, of course," Murphy said. "We—"

HE BROKE off as one of his men came leaping up the corridor and burst into the room. The newcomer seemed to radiate alarm.

"Chief—there's a couple of Patrol ships in the neighborhood. I heard somebody signalling them over the radio, and I'm pretty sure it was that pilot on the ship we contacted a while ago."

Braden's pulse leaped. Jupe had radioed the Space Patrol! Learning of Braden's capture, he had evidently decided there was no other course left to take.

"The Patrol ships—how far away are they?" Murphy questioned swiftly.

"That's impossible to say, Chief. But they're on the way here."

Murphy snarled, "That doesn't give me an idea of how much time—" He whirled back to Braden, his black eyes suddenly glittering with triumph. "You! Come along—quick! We're going to the control room."

"All right." Braden gripped Joan's hand briefly and flashed Deggard a meaningful look. Then he was out in

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the corridor and being hurried along under the ready weapons held by Murphy and the others. The ship stirred with excitement.

Murphy led the way into the control room, which was considerably larger than the one aboard the *Martian Maid*. The man who had warned of the presence of the Patrol ships took up a position before the radio unit, and Braden realized that this particular member of the crew must be the pilot. With Murphy, Blinky and the remaining man, that made four of the pirates in this immediate part of the ship. If the odds went no higher than that, there would be a chance.

A glance at the instrument panel showed Braden that the Telecontrol—what he had led Murphy into believing was the "psycho-scope"—was switched off and had not been put into use. Evidently Murphy had feared to touch a strange device that might very well impair the function of the ship.

Murphy gestured at the Telecontrol unit. "Get busy," he told Braden. "I want to know where and how far away those Patrols ships are."

BRADEN switched on the device, trying to appear casual. He was grateful for the fact that the ship was in free fall, with the manual controls thereby not in operation. He turned up the power until an indicator gave the proper reading.

"What does that do?" Murphy asked suspiciously.

"Controls the amount of power," Braden explained. "The more power you use, the more distance you get." He turned to one of two nearby acceleration hammocks. The Telecontrol headpiece was still looped over the master unit swing-arm where he had left it, and the headpiece cord was still plugged into the unit itself. "This sends out and picks up the thought impulses." He drew the headpiece down over his hair, fitting the electrodes against his temples and forehead.

"Wait!" Murphy snapped. His weapon jerked level. "This could be a trick for all I know. The gadget might not do what you say it does."

Braden shrugged. "It doesn't make any difference to me. This is your party. You suggested it—I didn't." He reached up as though to remove the headpiece. He had to fight against the sick, sinking sensation that was rising in him. But there could be not the slightest misstep in the face of the ready guns that hungered after his every move. "If you aren't interested in what those Patrol ships are up to—"

"Ah, my dear lad, let's not be hasty! The Patrol ships are the important thing, of course. Go ahead, go ahead."

Braden shrugged again, but his pulse raced in exultation. He pressed a stud on the master unit—and the circuit was completed. The ship was his now. He was the brain and the ship was the body, servant of his every wish and command.

He did not have to worry about his actions, for any actions he made would be mental and therefore invisible. And any attempt by the others to operate the manual controls would result in the paralysis of the relay system.

He had only to—

Men came crowding about the control room doorway, watching the proceedings curiously. Braden choked back a groan of despair. The odds had gone up again—too far up.

He gave an appearance of concentrating, aware that Murphy and the others were watching him narrowly. Then he frowned and shook his head.

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"There's too many people around and too much mental interference. I can't pick up anything this way."

"Ah . . . naturally, naturally." Murphy ordered the spectators out of the control room and told Blinky to close the door.

Braden acted swiftly while Blinky was still across the room. He sent swift commands into the headpiece.

THE JETS of the *Cosmic Dust* roared into sudden life. The abrupt acceleration meant conditions of gravity that brought the pirates sprawling to the floor. There were startled gasps. Guns crashed wildly.

Then the ship turned through a ninety degree angle. The pirates went tumbling toward one wall of the room in a tangle of arms and legs, shouting and cursing. Braden kept them pinned there for a moment as he piled on additional g's of savage acceleration. Then he revolved the ship through another ninety degree angle and blasted the jets in a direction opposite to the original line of thrust. Again the pirates went whirling and bouncing across the room. They were too concerned now with protecting themselves from damaging collision to use their weapons.

Braden alternately accelerated and decelerated and turned the ship end for end. He kept Murphy and his henchmen tumbling about like dice in a cup. It was a prodigious and reckless waste of fuel and a severe strain on the ship, but Braden could not afford halfway measures. What he had to do had to be done swiftly, thoroughly and violently—and he did it with his eyes squeezed shut, his teeth set, gripping the thigh and chest straps of the hammock against which he was bracing himself.

Then he steadied the ship and was ready for mop-up operations. Removing the headpiece, he leaped to where Murphy lay sprawled nearby, dazed and shaken. He tore the weapon from the pirate chieftain's limp fingers and brought the butt down in a stunning blow to the man's head. Murphy went limp.

Braden ducked and whirled as a gun crashed behind him. Bullets sliced the air with frightening closeness. Blinky, across the room, was now moving to sit up and steady his weapon for a more careful aim.

Only an instant's advantage remained to Braden. He swung his gun and fired with grim deliberation. Blinky's face twisted as the bullets hit him in the chest. The weapon in his fingers dropped, and he sagged back against the wall.

Braden pivoted, still firing. One of the two remaining pirates had raised himself on one knee and was holding his gun with both hands as he braced himself to shoot. Braden's bullets caught him squarely in the face. He went limp as he squeezed the trigger, his shots hitting the ceiling.

The pirate who had warned Murphy had long since been out of action. He lay unconscious against one of the walls, bleeding from a gash on the forehead.

Braden drew a deep breath and turned to the radio unit. All that remained now was to summon the Patrol ships. The remaining pirates would not be able to enter the control room at once, and with both weapons and the Telecontrol he could easily keep them at bay until help arrived. Leaderless and with the brain of the ship beyond their reach, the pirates would be left with no alternative but to surrender.

THE TWO lieutenants in command of the Space Patrol vessels were the last to leave. They gripped Braden's hand in turn.

"You're going to get a lot of pub-

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licity for having captured Mournful Murphy," the lanky one said. "Not to mention quite a bit of reward money."

"Wish I'd been the one to collar Murphy," the lieutenant with the sandy hair put in. "I'd be satisfied with the credit alone. It would be worth a couple of jumps in rank."

Hanlon stood watching with a wide grin. He had arrived not long after the patrolmen.

Nearby were Joan and Deggard. Though Deggard had had warning of what would happen when Braden put the Telecontrol into operation, both he and Joan were considerably bruised.

Murphy and his pirate crew were already under guard in the Patrol ships, which had been readied for departure. The moon was close, and since the *Cosmic Dust* and the other vessels were in free fall, a point would soon be reached where deceleration would have to begin.

The two lieutenants now began slipping on their helmets. The one with the sandy hair grinned as Braden dropped an arm about Joan, who leaned her head contentedly against his shoulder.

"Hang on to him, miss," the lieutenant said as he prepared to seal his face-plate. "Men like him are pretty hard to find."

Joan nodded, smiling. "I intend to," she said.

Deggard cleared his throat gruffly. "And that goes double, for me!"

THE END

PUSHING IN REVERSE

By A. T. Kedzie

STARTING THE engines of the Jet Age isn't the same as pushing the starter button in your car! For a jet to "catch", the high-speed turbine must be brought up to speed before the fire starts, somewhat in the way that an ordinary engine must be turned over before it "catches". But, while ordinary engines have electric starting motors powered by storage batteries drawn around on a cart, which work like a charm, no satisfactory starting units for jet planes have been built without tapping the permanent power lines of the field. That is because a tremendous amount of energy is required to get those jet motors spinning.

Now the field men have come up with the easy and obvious solution. They simply park one jet, with its engine running, about ten feet in front of the one to be started. The terrific blasting exhaust of the leading jet has more than enough power to start the trailing engine spinning. The leading jet is far enough ahead to prevent burning up the trailer or damaging it with high temperatures.

Rocket engines don't have this starting problem, of course, since their motors kick off at the crackle of an electric spark. In interceptor planes this instant starting might be important in a situation where seconds and minutes count.

Raiding Neptune's Domain

A MERE two or three miles out into the sea off the coast of Long Beach, California, reposes a reservoir of precious oil which may exceed in potential the entire fields of the Earth! The fact, of course, that this potential treasure-house is smothered by hundreds of feet of water poses a problem of no mean measure. Yet engineering problems have never deterred men from raiding Nature—nor will this one.

At present, plans are afoot to "mine" this oil by the ingenious process of sinking mine-shafts vertically downward on land for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of feet, and then branching out horizontally with concrete-lined tunnels which all lead to large concrete domes from which conventional wells can be dug. All of this occurring, mind you, with hundreds of feet of ocean bottom—and ocean—overhead! Men will, literally, become troglodytes and moles to gain access to these incalculable riches.

The project is still tentative and, until irresistible economics forces the issue, it will probably remain in the blueprint stage, but this means only time, just as it is only a matter of time before men are forced to go to coal for their oil by synthesis. When the pressure becomes great enough, no matter what the difficulties, science delivers the goods!

—Jack Winter

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SPACE SUITS FOR SEALS

by Merritt Linn

A MENTAL exercise that can provide many entertaining moments can easily be found in a consideration of what you would do and how you would behave—in a spacesuit! This speculation is not as idle as it sounds, for by no means does it involve the simplicities of an ordinary diving suit, as some writers are prone to imply. Navigating in free space, outside gravitation, in a hypothetical spacesuit, is really a first-rate problem requiring some serious thinking.

Imagine yourself, then, in a spacesuit. It is made of a rubberized fabric, naturally airtight, and topped with a transparent helmet equipped with an adjustable shutter-shade so you can avoid the bare Sun. Strapped to your back, of course, is the air-purification and supply apparatus, food—depending upon the size of the tanks—for from two to six hours. Survival in the limited confines of a spacesuit can't—understandably enough—be forever. Because the internal pressure of the suit is atmospheric, accordion-pleated joints are found at the elbows and the knees and the wrists and the waist—or wherever a bending motion is to be expected. Fifteen pounds per square inch is a strong pressure, and it can iron out a rubberized fabric, making it impossible to bend without these appurtenances.

You want to move around in space, but that isn't possible without some sort of rocket motor, and so you are equipped with a small rocket shaped something like an overblown signal pistol. So you won't lose it, a lanyard holds it to your suit.

But moving around in space isn't just a matter of pointing your pistol in the opposite direction to which you want to go, and then pressing the trigger. It's much trickier than that, for reasons which only Heinlein has discussed in any detail. In order for you to proceed in a straight line from the point at which you're located, the push of the rocket motor must be directly in line with your *center of gravity*. This is the point of your body on which you'd balance if, say, a hand were supporting you at the stomach or back, on Earth. If the push is directed anywhere else, all that happens is that you set yourself spinning like a top—and moving in the wrong direction.

Obviously it will take you time to find this center of gravity but, fortunately, you can change its position by extending or retracting your arms and legs. Experimentally, then, you give yourself only a very slight push with the rocket motor. Then you sight on your target and correct that push with small additional ones. When you're finally grown skillful enough, you can go places with a single calculated push, but until then you'll spend a good deal of time spinning around in fast or slow circles. Some sighting device built into your helmet will help, of course, but still you'll have to operate by feel, by the "seat of your pants" technique.

The chances are very strong that good jugglers will make the best spacesuit operators and a trained seal (with modifications!) could do best of all. Manipulating a spacesuit is precisely like trying to balance yourself on a point, the point of thrust, and differs very little from regular rocket-ship operation....

"Hey! You in suit Number 4! Correct that drift. Pull in your right arm. Okay. Now take it easy. If you're not careful we'll pick you up drifting toward the Sun. Watch it—that's it—easy, now—you've got it!"

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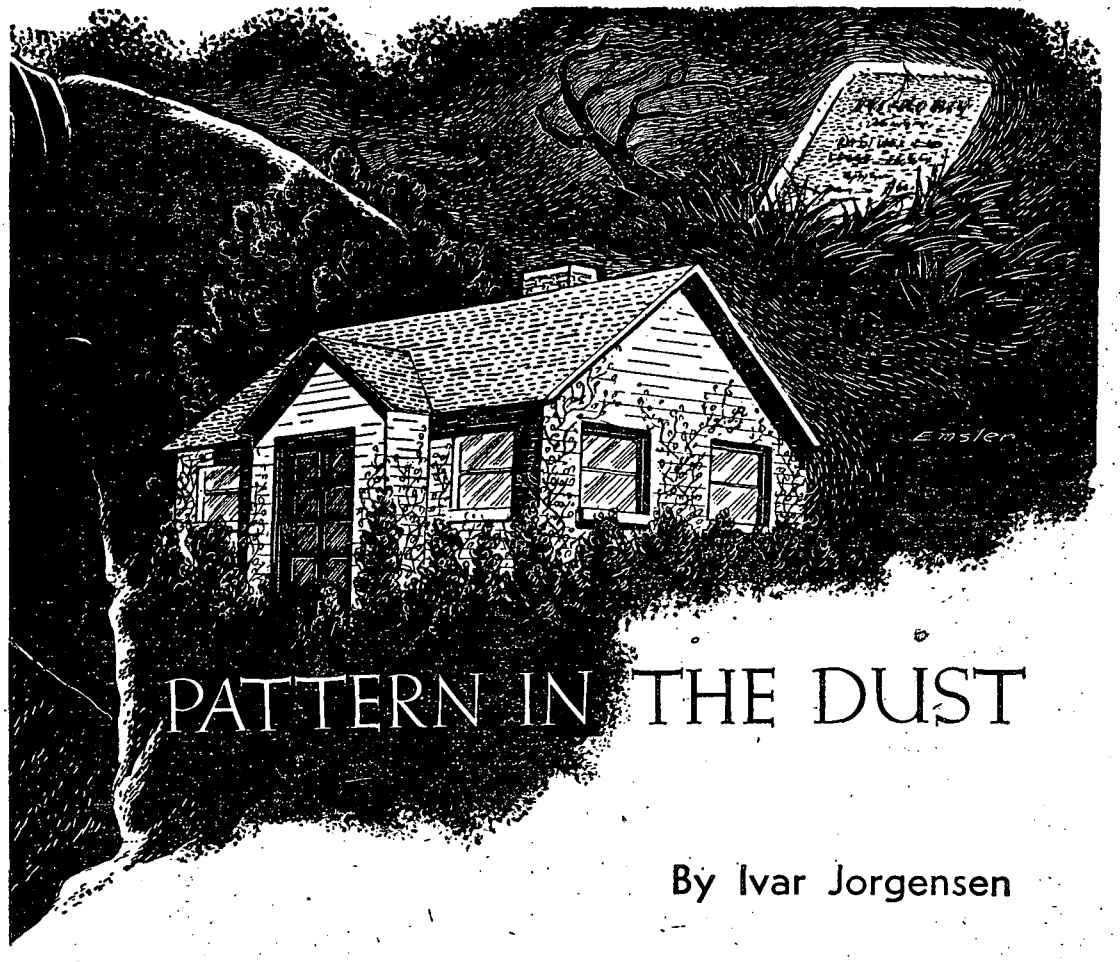

PATTERN IN THE DUST

By Ivar Jorgensen

The young man sobbed as he knelt at the desolate grave of the girl he'd loved—and murdered—one hundred years ago . . .

"IT MAY be the cure we're looking for and it may not," Dr. Frederick Lawrence said. "If you had waited another year before getting this fever, we could be entirely certain."

Lawrence was a handsome man, dark, alert, and yet with a dreamer's eyes. He was looked upon in the medical profession as a comer. He paced back and forth past the foot of the white bed and seemed to direct his remarks more to Carol, who sat stroking her husband's head, than to Greg himself.

Greg's hot, glazed eyes were upon Carol also; eyes which appeared not to see, so full were they of the burning languor this horrible fever had brought.

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But Greg did see, and his mind, under its blanket of sickness, still functioned normally. His thoughts of Carol were foremost, which was entirely natural. On the threshold of death a miser thinks of his money; a dictator of his power.

Greg thought of Carol: I don't want to go away from her. I am not afraid to die. The fading out, the emptiness, the passing over—these hold no terrors at all. But I've had Carol for such a short time. It isn't fair that I be forced to leave so soon. Not fair.

"Has the serum been tested at all, Doctor?" Carol asked the question as her cool hand continued to stroke Greg's brow.

Dr. Lawrence's compelling eyes rested on her for several silent moments. He made a deprecating gesture. "After a fashion. It worked satisfactorily upon rodents."

"But rodents are not human."

"That's true. On the basis of what I've already done with it, I'd say there's not even a fifty-fifty chance of its saving your husband. Its merit lies solely in the fact that without it—" Young Dr. Lawrence shrugged again. "—there's no chance whatever."

Greg couldn't see what the hesitation was about. Lawrence had added it up neatly. Less than half a chance—no chance at all. Where was the point of dissension? He smiled, laid his hand on Carol's, and said, "You'd better get out your hypodermic, Doc."

TEARS WELLED into Carol's eyes. "But darling. If—if it doesn't work . . ."

"If it doesn't, we've lost nothing."

"And if it isn't administered pretty quick, it won't matter one way or another," Lawrence said.

Carol was crying softly now and Greg strove to buck her up. "It's going to work, honey. I've got a hunch, and you know my hunches. Remember that horse last year when we were at the track? He didn't have a chance. But I knew differently."

Dr. Lawrence had already started preparations. "As I told you," he said, "this formula is revolutionary in theory. It runs opposite some established medical concepts." He pushed the needle of the hypodermic through the cork of a sealed bottle and drew dark fluid up into the chamber. "While in my heart I'm also certain it will work, I still can't say what your reactions will be."

Greg smiled and patted Carol's hand. "I might become famous, honey. The first man to be saved by a new serum. Let's get it over with. The sooner I'm up and around, the sooner I can appear on radio and television."

Carol didn't have the courage to watch during the injection. Still holding Greg's hand, she turned her head away and cried softly into her handkerchief. Dr. Lawrence, tight-lipped, bared Greg's arm, and in a moment the latter felt the mild bee-sting of the needle entering his flesh.

Dead silence beat and echoed thunderously in the small hospital room. Lawrence withdrew the needle, stepped back, his whole attention riveted upon the patient in the bed.

Greg lay motionless for some moments, his chest rising and falling in an almost imperceptible rhythm. He opened his eyes. "Don't feel anything, Doc. Not a thing. It's like—"

Carol turned, screamed. In her hand was—nothing.

GREG'S FEVER was gone. That was the first knowledge that came to him as consciousness returned. The racking, retching pains had vanished. The flaming furnace in his chest had burned itself out. His next thought was: I am not the same person I was.

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It did not occur to him to classify this condition as death. He felt such strength of life, such vigor, as to make such a conception unthinkable. So two facts became established in his mind: he was alive, and he had licked the fever.

But with the opening of his eyes, there came complete bewilderment. He lay, stark naked, upon a close-cropped lawn. It was a rather sheltered spot, bordered in a semicircle by a ring of close-set trees. Nearby stood a smart white building that could have been a residence, or possibly a garage. It was a severely designed building, a radical architectural departure from any structure Greg had ever seen.

But such things were noted only in passing, because Greg's attention was rooted mainly in his own nudity. Lying naked in someone's yard. It was like one of the old standard nightmares, except that Greg knew he was alive, awake, and that all this was very real. Before taking time to wonder about his surroundings, his nude state must be corrected.

He lay still for some minutes, waiting for a sound, for some sign of activity about him. There was none save the contented whisperings of the trees above him. Gradually a hope arose. There was a feeling of *absentia* about this strange house. A quiet waiting, as houses seem to wait for the return of their tenants.

Greg got slowly to his feet. After a few moments he realized he was holding his breath. He breathed deeply and the blood pounded in his ears. Still no break in the pastoral quiet about him. He compressed his lips grimly and took a step toward the house. Another—another. Only the leaves in the trees stirred, and they seemed to be urging him on, striving to give him confidence.

The flagstones of the winding walk were under the soles of his bare feet and the door to the strange house confronted him.

Magically, it opened. He started back in surprise. The door closed. Greg grinned in relief. Obviously he was breaking an electric eye beam with his body. He did not waste time trying to locate the electric eye, but stepped forward through the doorway into the house.

THE INTERIOR of the house completely eclipsed the exterior in daring originality. Greg wondered for a moment whether or not he had come inadvertently into some sort of futuristic exhibit, rather than a place where people lived. There seemed no rhyme or reason to the place; yet, taken over-all, it presented an amazing picture of both beauty and convenience. Thin spiderweb cables were flung down from the high ceiling, upon which were suspended glass rectangles which were evidently rooms. These rooms were attained by following equally spidery circular staircases which gave the impression of winding off into infinity.

Greg waited, tense, for signs of life. There were none. Finally he built up the courage to go forward. Clothing was the problem of the moment. A bedroom seemed the logical answer.

He climbed one of the staircases and was surprised at coming directly into a room with a broad, low bed and a streamlined highboy, the cut of which was obviously masculine. He found the wardrobe and his nudity was soon a thing of the past.

At least, moderately so. The clothing he found was entirely functional. It reminded him of a beach getup done along startling lines. But he could find no other clothing and was not inclined to be choosy.

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Still bewildered, but far more sure of himself than he had been before, Greg gave closer attention to the strange house. It occurred to him that he could easily get into trouble for illegal entry, and started to leave the bedroom. But near the exit he became intrigued with a panel of knobs and dials on the front of what could have been the latest thing in television sets; or, for that matter, far beyond the latest thing. There were about a dozen of the knobs, each with a notation underneath. These notations read: audio, visual, sensory, ultra perceptive, and so on.

Familiar with the first two only, he snapped the audio and instantly heard a voice coming from a hidden loudspeaker: "... thus it can be easily seen that our Union must be on the alert at all times. Preparedness is of course the watchword. At any moment some unimportant incident could be taken by the Federation as an excuse for unleashing their lightning. While this crisis lasts, we must maintain a calm clear-headedness, but at the same time shun all forms of appeasement. And above all, let us fervently hope that this year of 2052 will not usher in a bloody holocaust which could easily be the end of civilization."

Stunned, Greg snapped off the broadcast. 2052! Then it was with surprising lack of panic that he remembered Carol and Doctor Lawrence and the hypodermic needle; that he knew what the serum had done. It had cured the fever, but that was not the extent of its powers.

ONE HUNDRED years! And, strangely, it was not the staggering miracle upon which his mind dwelt, but rather a puckish bemusement relative to the timetable involved. Why, he wondered, had it been exactly one hundred years? Why not ninety-nine, or one-hundred-one? And now came the most thundering realization of all:

Carol had been dead for many years.

Carol dead! The thought brought a heartsickness almost akin to the physical. Somehow he could not visualize that beautiful, vibrant body ever experiencing the changes of death. Nor did he want to visualize it.

His mind clotted with painful thought, Greg came back to the moment and realized he had left the strange house and was walking blindly down a street. People were passing him on the broad sidewalks; people dressed as he was dressed. Sleek, shining vehicles went by silently and he had the thought: one hundred years ago such automobiles would have been laughed at.

Other knowledge was garnered as he walked blindly down the wide, pleasant street. He had moved swiftly in time but not in distance, because there, old and ivy covered—but apparently still functioning—was the hospital in which he had received the injection of serum so long ago. Yes, there was the hospital, so of course this was still Mortonville, the quiet little suburban town where he and Carol had gone through the ecstasies of first love and marriage.

The town had changed, but it did not appear to have grown to any great extent. In fact, many of the old buildings remained as before. There was an arresting mixture here of the old and the obviously new.

But all these impressions came upon the back of his mind, so to speak. Overshadowing all else was his great sense of grief and loneliness. Carol was dead! All the people he had known existed no more. *Carol—Carol—Carol.*

Then came the next logical step in his thought sequence. As though it

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had happened but yesterday—which to him it had indeed—he felt an overwhelming urge to visit her grave. Swiftly he oriented himself and turned left at the next intersection. If the grave existed, he knew where to find it. Desperately he hoped it still did exist as he hurried across town to the tree-dotted cemetery where Mortonville had always placed its dead.

The cemetery had not changed greatly. The trees were larger, and some of them were gone now. Also, the cemetery was not too well kept up and gave the impression of long disuse. Possibly, he thought, the dead were no longer buried. But when would such a change in funeral procedure have taken place? In 1952, Carol had been twenty-three. If she had lived to an old age, there could easily be no grave. No grave to weep on. Only a memory for a man out of his time but not beyond the yearning for it.

BUT HE found the grave. Wandering in a part of the cemetery completely untended and long run down, he pulled the clinging ivy from a small, plain stone to read the words:

Carol Hempstead
Born Aug. 7, 1929
Executed for murder
Nov. 17, 1954
May She Rest In Peace

Executed for murder. Greg blacked out.

And in the half-world of his unconsciousness was such an agony of mind as to be unbearable, as to act as a stimulant and bring back clear, torturing reality.

Executed! But why? How? Sweet little Carol hearing the pronouncement of death for murder! But whose murder? It was grotesque—unthinkable. But from the alchemy of this horrible knowledge and the agonies it brought, there was brewed an overpowering urge in Greg's mind. Nay, more than an urge. A certainty, an iron command.

He had to go back!

If I came here, he told himself, I can also go back from here. Doors open for those entering as well as those leaving. The same path that runs up the hill runs also down.

I must go back—back—back.

What Greg did he never knew nor cared. There was something in it of strength—a new strength he had felt when lying naked on the lawn beside that strange house. A power—but a blind power. Yet strong enough to achieve a purpose without knowing how. And Greg was standing in a familiar darkened room with the odor of heliotrope in his nostrils.

He had returned.

He stood for a moment filled with a great happiness, while the weakness of sudden and violent transition quivered through his body, faded, and gave place to strength. He moved toward the door and opened it. The hall was dimly lit from the floor lamp in the living room.

And there were voices. Old familiar voices. Greg stopped.

"I think it's about over, Carol. I can never practice again, of course, but there are other ways to make a living."

"It was so cruel—so unjust."

"It could have been worse. If they'd found a body, it would have meant the chair. For me—and possibly—"

"For me?"

"Probably not. But who can tell? We only know the absence of a *corpus delicti* saved our hides."

Carol's voice was empty—listless. "That would have been mere anticlimax. What they've done to us already — shunned — ostracized. Oh, Fred!"

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GREG MOVED forward until he could look into the living room and see Carol press her body into Frederick Lawrence's arms and against his breast. Red rage flamed in Greg's brain.

So that was it! This man hadn't been a doctor. He'd been a devil! A fiend! He'd known all along what the serum would do! He had wanted Carol and he'd gotten her. Greg shook his head like a groggy fighter. How much actual time had elapsed? What day was this? What month? What year?

Lawrence's voice was tender, soothing. "I know, darling. I know. But we have each other. And the time has come to go away together. I'll make you forget all this. I swear it!"

Greg leaned against the wall for support. All the time this conniving blackleg had had this plan in his mind. An untried serum! What a ghastly lie. Greg could visualize the long months of research behind it. Lawrence had known excatly what that serum would do.

"You've been so good to me, Fred. If it hadn't been for you I think I'd have gone mad!"

"But you do love me?"

Carol did not answer and Lawrence said, "You need a drink, darling. And I'd like one myself. I'll get it."

"No. It's in the kitchen. You'd have to hunt. Sit still."

Carol got up and went out of the room.

Greg's rage was now of a crimson hue. The gun! It had been in the drawer under the winter blankets. Was it still there? He went like a raging shadow into the bedroom and opened the lower drawer of the chest. The gun was there.

He took the gun out into the living room and fired four bullets into the skull of Frederick Lawrence.

Four bullets and that was all because a pull of almost tidal proportions was dragging at him. And he knew his return had been a temporary thing; knew his place was a hundred years hence in a time not born, among people who did not yet exist, by a grave not yet dug.

The gun fell from his hand and the tidal wave, against which his will had stood for a time, swept him up and spun him like an atom in a vortex.

CHILLED in body and mind, he stood in the graveyard while the sun beat down and the trees whispered. But now their whisperings were hostile, sardonic, and he realized what he had done. Was it possible? Could such a grisly, bloodcurdling joke have existence in fact? He had to know.

Again he strode down the wide streets to a place he had known. The building of his other years was gone—the old, placid public library. But in its stead had arisen a grander, newer one. He stumbled up the broad steps, into the vast interior.

"The old newspaper files, please."

The girl behind the desk glanced up. Her gaze held for a moment—a questioning gaze. Then, "Newspaper files. Room Seven. Out the main door to your left."

He dug through the newer editions, back—back to where they became yellowed and long-forgotten. And there it was. An article by a sob-sister journalist of olden times:

> They executed Carol Hempstead today for the pistol murder of her clandestine sweetheart, Frederick Lawrence. Carol walked to the chair with a firm step and a calm face.
>
> Her conviction and execution vindicates, to a certain extent, those officials of the law who believed but could not prove the guilt of this pair in the disappearance of Carol's husband some months before the murder of Lawrence.
>
> The truth or untruth of these accusations will never be known. It looked for a time like Carol would escape the chair on the grounds of insanity. She maintained to the

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very end that her husband killed Lawrence and then disappeared into thin air. The insanity plea was rejected, however, when experts testified Carol Hempstead was an excellent actress rather than a mentally deranged person.

A strikingly beautiful girl, Carol—

GREG GOT up from his chair and walked out into the street. He stared straight ahead and staggered somewhat. But no one stopped him as he went on his unseeing way.

I did it. I executed her myself. It was not true when I read it on the stone. It was not true until I went back and made it true.

He was again in the cemetery, the long—unused part of it drawing him like a magnet.

I sat her down in the chair. I strapped her in.

He fell to his knees.

I pulled the switch.

And he grieved for a girl who had been dust one hundred years.

THE END

MACHINES MAKE THE MONEY

By Rita Glanzman

THE USE of automatic machinery in offices—including computers—is increasing tremendously. Practically all Big Business is investing in these fantastic pieces of metal and motors, and everything from payroll-computing to check-making is now done automatically. The speed and accuracy are tremendous; the labor necessary is trivial. In addition errors don't occur. In tedious repetitive tasks such as offices engage in, men can't compete against machines. And that's good—who wants to slave over a column of figures?

While most of us are not personally acquainted with office practices and so cannot see the over-all picture, there is one opportunity for us all to notice the change. The Post Office, one of the country's biggest—and most antiquatedly-run—businesses is now using automatic machinery to process money orders!

And that is just a sample. This use of office machines, predicted by Norbert Wiener, is part of the coming "second industrial revolution", wherein machines are displacing people at boring routine tasks.

There is only one exception to this general rule: the beautiful secretary can't be replaced by the machine—not because she can work as well, but because...

TO HADES WITH PLUTO

LESS IS known of the major planet Neptune than is known of any other with the exception of Pluto. Neptune swings in its vast, ponderous orbit far beyond the confines of mighty Jupiter's, and all that is given of the planet is a series of numbers measuring its orbit, orbital speed, approximate diameter and rotational speed, and the fact that it possesses one satellite—Triton. "Possessed" one satellite is more correct, for a brief announcement a couple of years ago declared that a second Neptunian moon had been discovered and tentatively named "Nereid".

Since that time a great deal of observational study has been devoted to plotting the orbit of Nereid, and now an exact picture appears of it. It is highly eccentric, thin and elongated, ranging from eight hundred thousand to six million miles in diameter. It is tipped at a startling angle to both Neptune's and Triton's planes.

It is satisfying to know that even this much has been done in the way of analysis of the outer planets, for the lack of knowledge of these remote members of the Solar System is amazing. Astronomers can do little more than give a mechanical picture of them. Pluto, Neptune—even Jupiter and Saturn to a lesser extent—are simply names. Ideas of their surface nature, and so on, are sheer guess and hypothesis. Since there are optical limitations upon telescopic observation, it now appears that no real information will be gleaned about these planets until Lunar observatories are erected and the baffling effects of atmospheric diffusion eliminated. Neptune swings in its majestic orbit unconscious of the rest of the System and concerned only with its pair of satellites and Pluto is really far out into Hades, almost beyond the ken of men. That it is known to exist at all is a miracle and a tribute to astronomical power.

—Salem Lane

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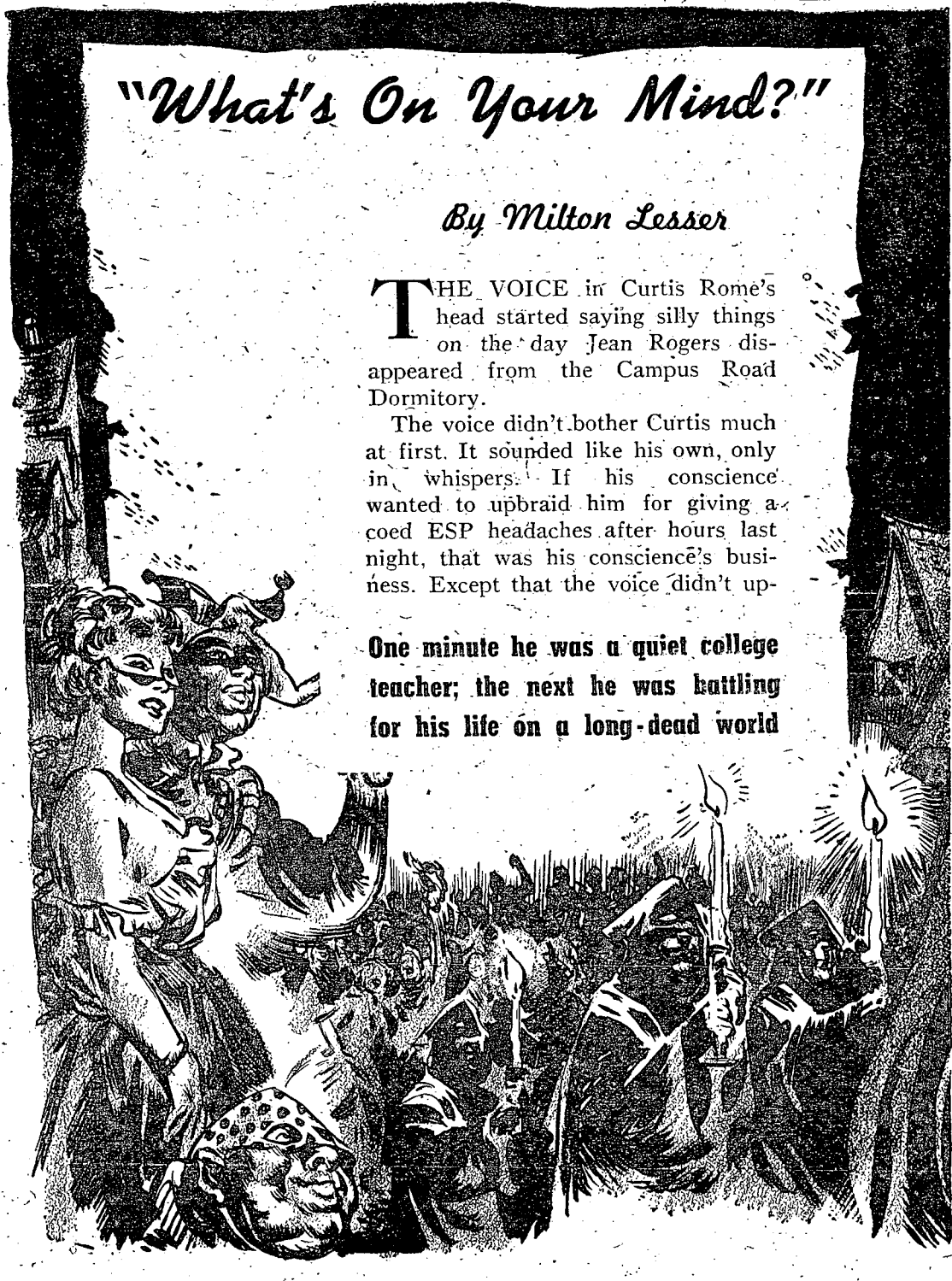
"What's On Your Mind?"

By Milton Lesser

THE VOICE in Curtis Rome's head started saying silly things on the day Jean Rogers disappeared from the Campus Road Dormitory.

The voice didn't bother Curtis much at first. It sounded like his own, only in whispers. If his conscience wanted to upbraid him for giving a coed ESP headaches after hours last night, that was his conscience's business. Except that the voice didn't up-

One minute he was a quiet college teacher; the next he was battling for his life on a long-dead world



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In the midst of carnival gaiety, the Druids carried their terrified sacrifice to the fire

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braid him, it congratulated him, thanked him for sending Jean Rogers along because they certainly could learn a lot from her, and could he oblige them with a male next trip?

To his knowledge, he had sent Jean Rogers nowhere. They had had cokes and ham sandwiches on cracked-wheat bread in the laboratory, and then Jean had demonstrated her unusual extra-sensory perception, remaining in the laboratory much later than Curtis had intended. After that, he had sneaked back across campus with her, hiked her up through a dormitory window, torn his best tweeds in a bramble bush, and gone back home to bed.

Now he lit a cigarette, toyed with the idea of sending down to the Campus Grill for a cup of coffee, decided against it when someone knocked on the door of his office. "It's open," Curtis called. "Come on in."

The man was tall, had dark hair and a trim little mustache, and Curtis judged him to be about thirty, his own age. "Dr. Rome?" the man demanded.

Curtis nodded, smiling. "But you can skip the title unless you happen to be a student; they like to use 'em."

"Um-mm. You're young for a department head, Rome. Name's Dunbar, Thomas. I'm looking for Jean Rogers."

"Oh?" Curtis raised an eyebrow when the voice, at mention of the girl's name, whispered *thank you* again inside his head. "What makes you think I know where she is?"

Dunbar shrugged. "No one seems to know. But her roommate says she went out with you last night before dinner. They haven't seen her since, either in the dorm or any of her classes today. Frankly, I'm a little worried."

"That's strange," Curtis told him. "But I don't think you have anything to worry about. It was a bit late, but I took Miss Rogers back to her dormitory last night. She'll turn up. Did you check the Campus Grill? No? She's down there for coffee three times a day."

DUNBAR SHOOK his head, and his voice took on an unfriendly edge. "I don't think you understand. No one has seen her since yesterday afternoon. No one. Her bed wasn't slept in. She has not reported to classes. She is missing, Rome, and you're the last person seen with her."

Curtis crushed out his cigarette, sat down. The voice said: *Not him, Curtis Rome. Not that one. Too much of a stuffed shirt, bound to give us a biased picture of the place. Try someone else.*

"See here," Curtis said, directing his anger at Dunbar, although the voice had set it off. "I don't know where the girl is. I had her do a few experiments for me last night, that's all. Just where do you fit into the picture, anyway?"

"I came down from Massachusetts for your homecoming weekend. Rather silly convention, don't you think? But Jean likes it. Well, she's young, but she has a keen mind, let me tell you."

Curtis smiled. "You don't have to tell me a thing about that, Mr. Dunbar. Miss Rogers' ESP potential is amazing. Psycho-kinesis particularly. Rhine would have loved to work with her at Duke, or Jurgens—"

"What the devil's ESP? Never mind, never mind. Then you say you can't help me, Rome?"

Curtis shook his head.

"Well, all right. But if Jean doesn't turn up by noon, I'm going to report this to President Garlin. I'm on the Board of Trustees, you know. Good day, Dr. Rome."

The man turned on his heel and stalked out of the office. Curtis looked at the wall clock. Ten-thirty.

The voice chuckled softly inside Curtis' head.

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HE MET Eva at the station an hour later, and she stood on tiptoe to peck his cheek. "I had a nasty trip, Curt. Berth over the wheels and all that. So this is Southeastern. Um-mm .... Daddy could have gotten you a position up North, Curt, in one of the bigger universities. Under Fuller, perhaps."

"I have my own psychology department here," Curtis told her. "More time to experiment. Besides, Southeastern is a nice place, once you get used to it."

"Well, I'm sure this homecoming weekend will be quite enough for me. Would you take me to my room now? I'd like to clean up and see your little ivory tower of a college. You don't really want to live here after we're married?"

They took a taxi to the Lodge where Curtis verified her reservation. She told him to pick her up at two, but he shook his head, told her he had a class until then, would pick her up a quarter past the hour.

Curtis got back to his office a few minutes before twelve, idly leafed through some exam papers. He couldn't concentrate. The voice was not speaking now, but somehow he could sense its presence in his head. And the Jean Rogers situation began to worry him. If what Dunbar had said were true, then the girl really had disappeared. Which didn't make sense, especially since Curtis had personally pushed her through her ground-floor window last midnight.

He propped his feet up on the desk, pulled the phone off its cradle, dialed the dormitory. "Hello? Hello, Mrs. Sparrow? This is Dr. Rome. Yes, Rome of psychology. No. No, President Garlin isn't here with me now. Should he be? Um-mm.... He did? You told him *what?* But I thought you didn't see us last night when— Yes, Mrs. Sparrow. Yes, of course. I assure you that no one was compromised. What? No, I don't know where Miss Rogers is now, that's what I called you about. Why does everyone think I know where she is? Yes. Yes. Goodbye, Mrs. Sparrow."

DUNBAR, DAMN his suave good looks, had flown to the prexy before noon. And from what Mrs. Sparrow had said, the two of them were on their way here now. Mrs. Sparrow had seen something, she wasn't sure what, last midnight. But she had heard Dr. Rome's name, she told them, and he was either helping the girl in or out of her window. By the time she got to the front door in her robe, both were gone. That was her story, as Curtis gathered it, and it certainly wouldn't help him any.

The voice said: *She sure is a garrulous old hen, isn't she? Well, she means well, and of course she doesn't really know a thing. Don't worry about her, Curtis! She can't get me into trouble.*

"You?" Curtis snorted. "What about me? She can get me into trouble, all right. I feel like I'm being framed." He shuddered a little and would have reached into a bottom drawer of his desk for a bottle of Scotch. That was the trouble with being too close to psychology: you felt aberrated at the drop of a hat. Relax.... Hell, everyone hears voices at one time or another. You couldn't explain them and you shouldn't try; after a while they just went away.

He jammed the drawer closed again when he heard footsteps in the hall. President Garlin came in without knocking, followed by a very grim Thomas Dunbar.

"Now then, Dr. Rome," said the prexy. "What's all this about a senior girl, a Miss Ronson?"

"Rogers," Dunbar told him.

"Rogers, then. Where did you take

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her, Rome? Why?"

Curtis said he did not take her anywhere, except to her dormitory room.

"Rome, if you patently refuse to tell us what we want to know—Mrs. Sparrow saw your taking the Rogers girl from her window, you know."

"I was not taking her out. I was putting her in. It was late and time for her to go to bed. Really, gentlemen, I just don't know; and so I can't help you."

Garlin tried a different tack. "The missing girl's roommate spoke of some experiments you've been doing with Miss Rogers. Care to talk about them, Rome?"

Curtis didn't quite see the connection, but the experiments certainly were not so cabalistic that he could not discuss them. He told of the cards and the dice, the abstractions and the colors. He finished with what he had told Dunbar previously: Jean Rogers had a veritable storehouse of untapped ESP.

WHEN CURTIS finished, Garlin scowled. "Tell me, Rome, was any hypnotism involved? I don't want you to say anything if you feel it might incriminate you, but on the other hand you can see my position. I'd like to get to the bottom of this here and now, just among the three of us. I see no need for the authorities to be called. Do you agree, Mr. Dunbar?"

"Yes and no," Dunbar said. "I agreed to give you some time to do this your way, Mr. Garlin. But it won't be forever. This afternoon or—"

Curtis cleared his throat. "No, I didn't use any hypnotism: it isn't necessary for those tests. Although I still don't see the connection."

"Simple." This was Garlin. "From what I have been able to find out. Jean Rogers was a level-headed girl. I don't think she'd just run off—not without suggestion of some kind."

Curtis' temper was in no real hurry, but slowly it was coming to a boil. Prexy or not, this was getting downright ridiculous. They couldn't stand there and accuse him of all sorts of things. . . .

"I think you'd better call your police after all," he said.

Garlin drummed on the desk with a pudgy hand. "We'll do nothing of the kind. I'd like to keep the scandal out of the newspapers, out of—"

Dunbar shook his head. "I'll have to agree with Rome here. If he doesn't want to talk to us, then it will have to be the police. I think he won't be quite so stubborn with them."

Garlin seemed reluctant. "You won't reconsider, Curtis, my boy? Dean Weathers leaves for William and Mary next semester. There'll be an opening. . . ."

And when Dunbar's face reddened, Garlin was hasty to add: "—that is, of course, if all this turns out to be a dragon made out of paper. What do you say, Curtis?"

"Not a thing. I just don't know. If I knew, I'd be happy to help. Now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I have a class. . . ."

When they had gone, grumbling, the voice said: *We could take Garlin, you know.*

EVA'S ANGULAR, almost regal figure looked good in an evening gown. Her skin was very white where the backless dress showed acres of it.

"Dinner," she said dryly, "and then the formal dance. Big event of the year. Rah-rah stuff, Curt?"

He mumbled, "Something like that."

Twice during dinner Eva remarked that he seemed oddly distracted, and Curtis' apologies were lame. When, over desert, he called her Jean,

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she asked him acidly what he had been doing with his spare time around campus. "I'm sorry," he said, smiling. "There's some trouble on campus with a girl named Jean, and I guess it's on my mind. I hardly know her, Eva, and that's the truth."

At the dance he couldn't quite enter the spirit of things. Southeastern's Homecoming was a wild and often a woolly weekend and Curtis began to drink too much. He never had had any trouble holding his liquor, but generally it made him gay.

Tonight it didn't. He withdrew into himself and Eva had to prod him for conversation all evening. "Really, Curt," she told him, "I did expect a warmer reception. If this juvenile weekend is getting you down, why don't we drive up to Washington? Why don't we, Curt?"

They could at that. Perhaps then the voice would go away, and surely by Monday Jean Rogers would be back with an explanation that would satisfy everyone. On the other hand, if the police were called in they might think he were running away. Which was ridiculous, because he had nothing to run away from. Only...

Want a pick-me-up? the voice demanded. *We have better music here. Better drinks, too. Come—*

"Shut up!" said Curtis.

"Shut up? Shut up! Curt, I was only trying to suggest—"

"Not you, Eva. Not—" But he couldn't tell her it was the voice he wanted to shut up. Anything but that. "Never mind. I'm sorry. Feeling out of sorts, I guess."

"I'll say!"

Come....

Something prodded the back of his brain, slipping around inside his head on tiny scurrying feet. It probed, found what it wanted, tugged.

Eva became foggy as they danced. His right arm came back toward his chest through Eva's body.

Eva started to scream, only the sound was hung up on a lot of nothingness, stayed there.

Eva disappeared, with everything else in the dancehall. With the dancehall.

SOMEONE TWANGED what could have been a zither. Curtis wasn't sure because he had never seen one. He sat on the stiffbacked wooden chair and someone gave him a flagon of wine. He drank.

"You're new here," a woman said.

"Don't be silly." This one had long blonde hair. "He's shaved off his beard for some reason, and he's wearing silly clothing, but I'd know Rumm anywhere. Right, Rumm?"

She was pretty, but she had an odd way of pronouncing his name. He wished he didn't feel so drunk. "Yes, I'm Rome," he told her.

The blonde smiled, patted his knee, "I hope you're finished with those foolish experiments. We've hardly seen you these last few weeks. Where'd you get the garments?"

It crossed Curtis' mind that he did not know this blonde girl, although she certainly seemed to know him. But how the devil did he get out of the dancehall so quickly? And what was this place, its air heavy with wood-smoke, loud with the twang of a zither?

Somewhere, a door slammed. Curtis heard heavy footsteps, the clanking of metal. "Rumm!"

He looked up. A giant of a man with a fierce face and a very black beard stood over him. "Tell me you don't tarry with my betrothed now!" he roared. "Go ahead, tell me."

Groggily, Curtis got to his feet. He almost sat down again when he saw that the man carried a great two-edged sword four feet long. "Are you going to deny it, Rumm?"

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Curtis felt giddy. "Whatever it is, how can I deny it, since you seem so positive?"

"No, Rumm. Your slippery tongue won't defend you this time. Defend yourself . . . ." The giant stepped back with a flourish and brandished his sword.

He lunged forward.

Curtis sidestepped and threw his flagon of wine full in the man's face. "I think he's crazy," Curtis said. "Someone call somebody!"

"He isn't crazy!" the blonde cried. "Here, take this." He held the haft of a sword, much smaller than the giant's, but still it was heavy.

"I don't know how to use it—"

Cursing, the giant lunged again, and Curtis backed away, swinging his weapon in a wide futile arc with both hands. Something stabbed at his shoulder, burned in. . . . He felt it grate against bone.

The feet ran around inside his brain again, found what they wanted. Once more the giant came for Curtis, and he was too weak to sidestep. Fascinated, he watched the sword approach, flicker, enter his belly. It was no more substantial than a cloud of smoke. . . .

He saw Eva standing, hands on hips, gazing about her. He took her in his arms, tried to dance. He felt dizzy.

"Where did you disappear so fast?"

Curtis smiled weakly, said something about having to powder his nose. He staggered.

"Curt, stop! What is it? First you disappear, make me lose my composure, everyone stares at me, thinks I'm drunk. Now you—stop, stop that. I don't know what you're doing, but you're getting my hair all wet. Your shoulder—what's leaking from it?"

It had been no dream. He could not explain it any other way, but he felt the numbness as he slipped to the floor. "Blood," he said, and then he fainted.

CHAPTER II

PREXY TAKES A POWDER

THE CUT required only first aid and three stitches, but Curtis was weak from loss of blood and the college doctor insisted he remain in the infirmary all day Saturday. He got out at five—which gave him sufficient time to return to his room, shave, and get ready to take an irate Eva to dinner.

But under his door he found an envelope lettered with official college symbols and the seal of the president. He read: *Rome: I'll be in my office all day Saturday. I want to see you. Garlin.*

Prexy certainly didn't waste any words, thought Curtis. He shrugged, called Eva, told her he might be a little late for dinner, held the phone several inches from his ear while she told him what she thought of college weekends.

The presidential mansion was across the quadrangle from Henderson Hall, and Curtis realized his battered coupe seemed incongruous beside Garlin's long, sleek sedan. A butler of sorts admitted him, he was ushered into a library, and soon the butler took him through a long hall to Garlin's office.

Prexy put down a stack of papers. "All right, Rome. No excuses—I want facts. There's some monkey business here, and I think you're at the bottom of it. What happened at the dance last night?"

"I cut myself."

"How did you cut yourself?"

"I—I'd rather not answer that." He could picture Garlin's face if he told about the dream which was not a dream at all.

"Rome, I'd suggest that you cooper-

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ate. Else—"

Said the voice: *I'm sorry about last night, my friend. I didn't mean for you to get hurt. Permit me to make up for that.*

"How?" Curtis said, listlessly.

Garlin snorted. "How? By telling me what I want to know, damn it. Listen, Rome, if you don't—"

Now, said the voice.

"—cooperate, I'll be forced to garble, garble, gar..."

IT SOUNDED just like that. Garlin's voice began to fade, and the sounds became unintelligible. Garlin followed his voice out of the room. Not through the door, not through either of the two windows. Garlin simply faded. Slowly, as one scene in a motion-picture fades into another, but with a difference. Nothing took Garlin's place. The prexy simply disappeared.

There, said the voice.

Curtis sat down in Garlin's own chair. "What happened to him?" he mumbled.

Same as Jean Rogers, my friend. Only this time I did you a favor.

"Wait a minute, just wait." The voice was there, Curtis had to admit it. The voice also could do things. "Don't tell me people can disappear just like that into thin air."

You did, didn't you? Last night?

That was a point. The dance hall had vanished, but it was a matter of perspective. To Eva, it was Curtis who had disappeared, suddenly, impossibly.

"Ye-es."

You simply slipped from one space-time continuum into another. Ordinarily, it is not possible. But thanks to a genetic freak, one chance in a million...

The butler chose that moment to enter the room. "Oh, pardon me, sir. But President Garlin—?"

"He isn't here," Curtis told the man lamely.

"I can see that, sir. What I want to know is this: where did he go?"

Curtis looked around. The place was an old Colonial mansion, with wrought-iron bars on the window. He smiled wryly. Even without them, college presidents don't go climbing out of windows. And there was only one door, leading past the butler's quarters. If Garlin had chosen any possible means of egress, his man would been aware of it.

"I don't know," Curtis admitted. "He just—left."

"Sir, I'd have seen him. I don't understand this at all."

"You have nothing on me," Curtis assured him. But he knew he couldn't let things go on like this. The voice—whatever the voice was—could make people disappear or, more accurately, could take them someplace else, as it had taken Curtis. If he called the police... But that was ridiculous. What could he tell them? "I hear a voice, yes—a voice. Me only. And it can make people disappear. It's taken Jean Rogers and it's taken President Garlin. It took me once, but it brought me back. Could you please investigate it for me?" Just like that. He chuckled dryly. They'd give him the full treatment for a story like that: straightjacket and all.

His other hope was to demand them back from the voice. But it had a way of coming and going, and right now, for example, he was not aware of it in his head.

THE PHONE rang shrilly and Curtis watched Garlin's butler pick up the receiver. "Police? Why, yes. Yes. No. He's not here now. I don't know, really couldn't say. A Mr. Dunbar, sir? Yes. Yes. As a matter of fact, Dr. Rome is with me now. Are you to be here shortly? Very well, I'll tell him to wait."

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The butler turned to Curtis. "Police, sir. Coming here about the disappearance of a Miss Rogers. They wanted to see the President, but their interest extends to you as well. May I get you a drink?"

Curtis shook his head. "What did they say about Dunbar?"

"Mr. Dunbar? Oh, he's coming with them. Frantic, sir, or so they say. But then, you can't blame him. His fiance seems to have met with foul play, sir."

Curtis shook his head again. "As far as I know, she did not. She simply disappeared. Do you believe President Garlin met with foul play?"

"No, sir. That is, I hope not. Oh, I certainly hope not."

"It's the same thing," Curtis told him. "Each of them has disappeared—but I'm sure no harm came to them." He realized he was saying this as much for the butler as for himself, but it didn't make him feel any better. He knew nothing beyond what he had read in Sunday supplements about alternate space-time continua. He only knew what was there to be seen on the surface: both President Garlin and Jean Rogers had disappeared. He wondered idly if the black-bearded giant would be out for their blood, too. He shuddered.

The police turned out to be one man, an old tobacco-chewing individual, at that. Curtis knew he would have to fence far more cautiously with Thomas Dunbar.

"There he is!" Dunbar cried. "That's Rome, the man I was telling you about, Peters. He took her."

Peters arranged his chaw as a big lump in one cheek so he could talk. "That true, young feller?"

"Certainly not," Curtis said at once. "I didn't take anybody."

"Well," Dunbar persisted, "he knows where Jean is."

Peters grunted, "How's about that? You know? Save a lot of trouble if you can tell me. Otherwise, I'll have to call long distance to Jeb Hawkins, and by the time Jeb gets here with his boys—well, it's a bother."

CURTIS COULDN'T tell them the bare facts as he knew them. There seemed to be no alternative and, in that case, he'd tell them nothing.

Dunbar said, "I say his silence is indicative of guilt, Peters. Will you be taking him in until Hawkins can arrive from Parsons Corners? That is the county seat, isn't it?"

Peters nodded. "It is, but I won't. I ain't got a thing to hold this boy for, son. Just hearsay, as they say."

Dunbar's face got red. "You're the only cop in town, aren't you?"

"That's a fact, son. Once there was another, during the war, because all them coeds—"

"Never mind. Rome, what are you looking so smug about?"

"I'm not looking smug. I'm just glad he won't arrest me, that's all."

"He should. You could be dangerous, and I don't see why they permit you to stay free, not with innocent girls—"

Curtis had a hunch Dunbar was trying to goad him to something foolish. Still, he had taken just about all he would take from the man. "Say that again," Curtis told him.

"I don't have to. It's written all over your face—"

Splat! Curtis felt his knuckles bruise against Dunbar's jaw. But he stepped back with satisfaction when he saw that one punch would be enough. Dunbar leaned over, slowly, like he wanted to tie his shoe. For a moment his head rested on Garlin's desk, and then he slid all the way to the floor.

"Wow!" Peters cried. "Mighty pretty punch you have there, son. Ever been a professional?"

"Nope." Curtis was feeling cheerful. "Just in college. I lost the middleweight state finals."

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Dunbar sat up, cleaning the blood from his lips with a handkerchief. "I charge—"

"Sure," Peters said. "Assault and battery. You'll have to come now, Mr. Rome. You won't give me any trouble, will you?"

Curtis said no he wouldn't. But he wished for one more chance to wipe the sneer off Dunbar's face as Peters led him from the room.

IN ALL his life, he had never bothered to consider what the inside of a prison cell was like. Actually, the bunk was quite comfortable, and with events piling up the way they were, Curtis needed a nap. He'd get a lawyer, and he thought he could prove that Dunbar's remark amounted to defamation of character, coming in front of both Peters and the butler as it did. Probably Dunbar would be more than willing to forget about both suits.

Just as Curtis settled himself comfortably, watching the sun stream in brightly through his barred window, the voice returned. *You're in trouble again.*

Curtis laughed. "Let's see you get me out of this one."

He had just meant to be conversational, but it was a mistake. The same feet tugged inside his head, not scurrying around at all, just walking where they had to go, sure of themselves, then pulling.

The cell disappeared.

Curtis stood on a knoll overlooking a little stream. The waters lapped playfully. Birds chirped. Insects hummed. Curtis found himself liking this; it was not often he got out into the country. Always too busy with his research, his laboratory, a hundred little details—hell, a man could grow stagnant. He'd have to thank the voice, but he'd demand some explanations, too. It was an adventure, and suddenly Curtis felt the need for adventure. But he couldn't go on like this, flitting from one world to the other on the voice's whim.

He took off his shoes and socks and waded in the stream, forgetting his troubles for a time. He even began to whistle, but he realized it was a song which had been popular five years ago. Somehow, he sensed it was Eva's fault: Eva had a way of settling him before he felt the need for being settled. Well, he'd have to talk with her. He'd—

He stopped whistling when he heard President Garlin's voice. There was no mistaking the booming accents, and the man was arguing. Curtis stepped behind a bush, heard footsteps approaching through the heavy grass. He peered out.

"—what do you mean, we can't walk back? That's exactly what I intend to do. Where are we anyway—about half way to Parsons Corners?"

CURTIS NEARLY stumbled from his hiding place. With Garlin was Jean Rogers, her blue-jeans rolled up just above her knees, her too-big boy's shirt opened at the throat. And barefoot, like Curtis.

Now she said, "Honest, you'll just have to understand, Mr. Garlin. We aren't within walking distance. We aren't even within flying distance of Southeastern. There's just no way we can get there unless they let us."

"And who are they?"

"Unfortunately, I don't know for sure. That Rumm guy tries to be helpful, but sometimes he confuses me more. You know, he reminds me of someone."

"Well, I only saw him once, and it's hard to tell with that big straw-colored beard of his, but I agree, Miss Rogers. I don't know who, though. I—it doesn't matter. Now, when do we leave this place?"

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Jean appeared to be exasperated. "I told you, I don't know. How did you get here?"

"Well, you won't believe this. I was just talking with Dr. Rome and—"

"Me too! He helped me in through a window, then—oops! Never mind, President Garlin. I...just don't think this concerns you."

"Oh, come now. I know you were out after hours; Mrs. Sparrow told me. It doesn't matter. Now, what happened?"

"Well—"

Curtis stepped out from behind the bush. He had nothing to hide from, but first he wanted to be certain that Jean and the president were alone. He didn't relish the idea of another meeting with friend Blackbeard.

"Hi!" he called. "Hello, you two."

"Dr. Rome, thank goodness," Jean said. "Maybe you can help us. I have a Homecoming date and, well—"

"Yes, Rome," Garlin stuck out a belligerent jaw. "You got us into this, so work your magic. When do we leave?"

Curtis smiled. "I'd like to get us back," he admitted. "Right now, I'm in prison. They'll be angry when they find I'm missing."

"He's in prison," Garlin said. "He's crazy!"

"But I don't know how to get us out of here," Curtis told them. "I don't know much more about this than you do, except for the voice.... Never mind, we'd better not talk about that. Speaking of your Homecoming date, Jean, he's awful mad—"

"Oh, he's always flying off the handle. Mother thinks he comes from a good family, so I date him. He calls me his fiance, but—"

"I had to hit him. That's why I'm in jail." Ordinarily, you don't brag about that sort of thing, but Curtis felt like puffing out his chest. Let Jean decide which of the two of them was a man—a real man. Now, why on Earth did he care what Jean thought?

"He's in prison again," Garlin groaned. "He's—"

More footsteps crackling through the undergrowth.

SOMEONE HAILED them from the other side of the stream, a thinnish, vaguely stoop-shouldered young man with an unkempt mouse-colored beard. He wore what could have been a jacket and leggings of chain mail.

"Well, I was wondering about you," he said. "And Rome, I see Rome has joined us here, too."

Jean whispered, "That's Rumm. I met him when I first came here."

His voice was awful familiar, Curtis thought. Familiar—yes! It was the voice inside his head!

"Rumm," Curtis said, "you've been talking to me inside my head?" His voice rose on the last few words and made it sound like a question.

"Of course. But by the Sacred Oaks, I thought you wanted to escape from prison, not come here."

"Yes, that's what I said. But I only wanted to make con—"

"This will never do. Here, I'll have things set right in a moment. You'll be able to do it soon yourself, you know. Well, goodbye—and don't worry about your friends. They're in safe hands here—for the moment."

"Wait!" Curtis cried as he began to fade.

"Wait nothing. First thing you know, you'll stumble back on the same spot and wind up in jail again. These worlds are co-existent, you know. Perfectly co-exis..."

The rest of it faded away, as did the pleasant countryside. Garlin seemed very angry about something. The man just couldn't admit something was beyond his comprehension, Curtis realized. So Garlin fumed when he watched Curtis disappear.

As for Jean, Jean waved to him,

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almost gayly, and he thought he heard her say something about Dunbar probably deserving whatever Curtis had given him....

"There he is!" Peters cried.

Curtis looked around. He stood outside Peters' two-room jail house, right out in front of it. Peters went back inside, came out with three other men. One of them was Dunbar.

"There's your man, Captain Hawkins," Dunbar said.

Hawkins was the balding fellow with a florid face. "He doesn't look very dangerous to me. Peters, you say he just vanished from his cell? You been drinking?"

"Ain't touched a drop, Cap'n. He just vanished, all right. You can see the cell's still locked. Mr. Rome, you going to come back in, peaceable?"

Curtis smiled grimly. He suddenly did not want to return to jail. He'd get out of it, yes—but it would be a nasty situation, it would take a lot of time, and he'd be no further along the way toward unraveling this mystery. No, he'd not go to jail at all. He had work to do.

Innocently enough, he walked to the group of men, a slight smile on his lips. Abruptly, he started to run, heard them shouting behind him, heard the footsteps pounding on pavement. He ducked into an alley, took three running strides, tripped over a garbage-pail cover, and fell flat on his face.

CHAPTER III

THE WILD HUNT

HE ROLLED over on his back and watched them storm into the alley—Hawkins and his two men first then Peters, then Dunbar.

"Shucks!" Peters cried. "He fell." It almost seemed that Peters wanted him to get away.

They formed a circle around him, and Hawkins said: "We'll add resisting arrest to the other charges, Rome. You crazy or something? It was just simple assault—"

Garlin had thought him crazy too, but for a different reason. And now it looked like they had him, but good. What had the man Rumm said? Something about Curtis himself being able to come and go at will between the continua? Because of a genetic freak or some such thing, one chance in a million? It was something like that, and he thought he'd better try now, because the way Hawkins looked, they'd be ready to throw the key away once they put him back in jail.

He concentrated. Hawkins and one of the others took him roughly by his shoulders, pulled him to his feet. He felt the plucking at his brain, softly at first, then more insistently.

"Hey!" Hawkins cried.

Curtis could see through them, could see through the walls which made the alley, could see the bright sunlight of that other world, whatever it was.

"He looks like smoke!" Hawkins roared, but his voice was very feeble after that.

Curtis stood up to his knees in the stream. Not far away, Jean, Garlin, and the man called Rumm were walking across the meadow.

Rumm snorted, "Are you back again?"

Curtis joined them. "Yes. Yes, I am. And I'm going to stay until you tell me what's going on."

"Your trousers are all wet up to the knees," Jean told him. "The latest thing I remember after you shoved me through my window and before I came here was you mumbling something about your pants being torn. Whatever's happening, it sure is rough on your clothing, Dr. Rome."

He smiled. "It's rougher on my mind. Too many people have been calling me crazy. Okay, Rumm, let's hear it."

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The man stroked his mouse-colored beard thoughtfully. "Not now," he said. "Listen, you remember that big giant of a man, the one with a black beard?"

Curtis said how could he forget.

"Well, I left town and came out here because he was looking for me. He's out after me now. So I have no time to explain. I'm about to leave, but you can stay here if you'd like. I would not advise it, but—"

"Why not?"

"Geoffrey could make the same mistake twice. He thought you were me, you know, and he attacked you. He'd do it again. What? You don't see how he could make that mistake?" Rumm smiled, fingering the beard which covered his cheeks, his chin, his throat. "Someday perhaps you'll see. For now, I have friends in a village about ten miles from here. I think we'd be safe there. You see, Geoffrey—and I are . . . dividing the affections of one woman. Geoffrey doesn't like it."

Curtis remembered the blonde.

"So, you can come with me or stay here, as you will. You might even return over that rise to Oaksboro, but then you'd run right into Geoffrey. Which will it be?"

Curtis considered, then rationalized. He wouldn't be running away from the black-bearded giant, he'd merely be staying with Rumm until he could unravel this mystery. "I'll go with you," he said.

Garlin frowned, spoke for the first time. "What about us? We can't just stay here. We—"

Jean grinned. "I don't see why you're so worried. We'll just go along, that's all. Okay, Rumm?"

He nodded, and they set out along the stream's bank.

THEY DID not see the horsemen until they climbed a little hill, but then Rumm looked back and whistled. "I was afraid of that," he said. "Geoffrey has friends—and horses."

Three riders came toward them at a gallop, still a trio of tiny dots across the meadow. "Can we hide?" Jean wanted to know.

Rumm smiled grimly. "Where?" The meadow was very wide and very flat, except for their little hill. One man might hide for a time in the shrubbery. Four could not.

On came the riders.

Rumm must have been holding his breath, Curtis realized. Now he let it out, suddenly, in a great rush of air. "That isn't Geoffrey," he said. "I don't know those people at all."

The riders reined up, hailed them. Three men, all in the mailed armor and leggings Rumm wore. Said one: "We're seeking a man named Rumm. Do you know him?"

Rumm answered with a question of his own. "What do you want him for?"

"I don't want him. Someone sent me—"

"It wouldn't be Geoffrey of Oaksboro?"

"I don't know any Geoffrey. No, it was the Druids. It seems this Rumm has something they want. I don't know what. Now, do you know him?"

Rumm smiled. "I'm your man," he said. "But you can tell your Druids it's going to cost them plenty. You can tell them—"

"We're not going to tell them anything. All we had to do was deliver this message. You can see the Druids yourself in Oaksboro. We're not going back there. Hell, you couldn't keep me there! Everyone acts like he has but a mile to midsummer in Oaksboro these days. Crazy, really crazy. Well, goodbye."

The three riders galloped away.

CURTIS WISHED he could put the pieces of this puzzle together.

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The rider had spoken of Druids as if those pre-Christian pagan priests of England were commonplace. Ages ago, Curtis knew, they worshipped the sun and their own private gods—with human sacrifice, too. But now—now the Druids were only history and legend.

Christianity had driven the Druids and their esoteric evil into the sea, but their memory still lingered on in rural Midsummer Eve festivals. In England, on the Continent, elsewhere. But it was harmless, and for a dozen centuries the Druids had only been a memory.

"A fine thing," Rumm was saying. "Those Druids have all of Tir na N'Og to pick from, and they have to be in Oaksboro. How can I go back there with Geoffrey waiting? But how can I refuse?"

Tir na N'Og—that one made Curtis' head swim. Ancient Irish land of Everlasting Joy. Pure myth, of course, yet didn't Macpherson write how Ossian went there, long and long ago, found the land of milk and honey to his liking, stayed many years? Ossian was at least a semi-historical figure, and Ossian had vanished. Through the ages there had been mysterious disappearances, and you really knew they had vanished if the men were important. Whole nations sometimes instituted fruitless searching. What, for example, happened to Ambrose Bierce when he disappeared one fine day not too many years ago? Bierce, who had a penchant for the supernatural anyway?

Or, Curtis thought, you could put the shoe on the other foot. Did mankind have any satisfactory explanation for the feral children who suddenly appeared—or feral adults—who seemed as ignorant of our ways as newborn babes? What of Kasper Houser, who appeared out of nowhere and then was assassinated years later although the German government protected him? Kasper Houser's assassin—who left no footprints in the snows where Kasper's body was found?

Was there, Curtis wondered, a mysterious trade between this world of Tir na N'Og and our own Earth? Could that explain vanishings and strange visitations, could it shed some light on the myriads of occult happenings, of strange deaths and stranger lives, which Charles Fort had spent his life to compile? Could it explain why Fort's friend and confidant had been murdered—in a locked hotel room?

RUMM SLAPPED his hands together, smiling. "I have made up my mind," he said.

"How?" Jean asked him. "What will you do?"

"I'll return to Oaksboro, of course. Once I see the Druids, they will give me sanctuary, and Geoffrey be damned! Will you three come with me?"

"Try and keep us away," Curtis told him. "I want to meet your Druids, Rumm. How about you two?"

Jean nodded eagerly. "So much of this half-answers some questions raised in the mythology we study at Southeastern—you bet I'll go. This Geoffrey guy couldn't mistake me for Rumm anyway."

Garlin grumbled something about not wanting to stay out here alone, especially since the sun was nearing the horizon. Soon after that, they turned and retraced their steps back to where Curtis had first seen them—and beyond.

It was dusk when they reached Oaksboro.

Not a very large town, Curtis realized. Just a few score buildings, low and rambling, like brick in the dusky light, although he couldn't be sure. Off in the distance, perhaps at the center of the village, a fire glowed and pulsed in the coming night.

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"The Druid fire," Rumm explained. "They light it now, keep it going until Midsummer Eve. No wonder the messenger didn't want to return to Oaksboro. But, of course, you never saw the Druid ceremonies. Yes, people often get frenzied—act crazy; or, as the expression goes, like they have but a mile to midsummer."

Men and women danced and sang in the streets, drinking and feasting on roasts from smaller fires. Twice girls danced a circle around them, laughing and teasing. One of them flitted close, kissed Curtis insolently, tried to tug him away to join their dance.

"Leggo!" he said, but she laughed, skipped away without him happily enough, singing that there were others. "Are they all crazy like that?" Curtis demanded.

Rumm smiled. "Depends what you mean by crazy. She wanted you for a partner at the dance, that's all. I'd have taken it as a compliment."

"No one's going to take him," Jean said. "I think I'd feel a little scared now, Curtis, if you weren't here. I'm glad you didn't go with that hussy."

Curtis patted her hand, then held it when she didn't try to draw it away. It crossed his mind that Jean probably could kiss him a lot more soundly than the dancing girl, far better than Eva for that matter. Eva! Eva would be more than a little angry about this second, longer disappearance. Not to mention the policemen from Parsons Corners. . . .

THE GREAT central fire burned in a broad plaza from which the narrow streets of Oaksboro radiated. There were more of the revelers here, more noise, more confusion. Rumm found an old hag sitting by herself, off to one side of the fire. She wore a black cowl over her head, and she hummed a meaningless little tune to herself.

"You're the Fire Watcher, aren't you?" Rumm demanded.

"You tell me," she cackled. "Do I look like a dancing girl?"

"My name is Rumm. I'm told that the Druids want me—"

"Rumm, did you say? Rumm? Ah, yes."

"Well, will you tell them I am here?"

She got up, a bent, twisted scarecrow under her cowl. "I'll tell them, but I don't know that it will do any good. Ah, but you were slow, Rumm!"

"Slow? We got the message, and we came."

"I'll tell them," she cackled, tottering to a building just off the plaza, disappearing within it.

Rumm rubbed his hands together. "Weird old thing, eh? I can make myself a fortune in gold from the Druids, you know. I have a talent which they covet. As far as I know, no one else has it. Well, we'll see. But I wish the hag would hurry."

In a moment, she came out, grinning toothlessly. "I told them," she said.

"Well, do they want me now?"

"No."

Rumm stared at her. "What do you mean, no?"

"I mean they do not want to see you, Rumm. As I told you, you were too late. They have someone else."

Rumm staggered back. To Curtis, he really looked like he felt a fortune in gold slipping through his fingers, only because he had been tardy by a few minutes. "How can they have someone else?" he asked the hag. "That's impossible!"

She shrugged bony shoulders. "I only tell you what they told me—"

Rumm pushed her aside, almost roughly. "Well, I'll see for myself." And he went within the building.

Jean looked puzzled. "What do you suppose it is they want, Curtis?"

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"Well, Rumm has a pretty neat trick, being able to send us from Earth to this Tir na N'Og place and back again. It could be that. I don't know." And he didn't. Like everything else in Tir na N'Og, Rumm was an enigma.

THEY DIDN'T have long to wait. When he came out, Rumm was not walking. He ran, breathlessly, and he stopped just long enough to cry: "If you value your lives, run! Follow me!"

Jean looked at Curtis. Garlin said, "He too is insane."

"Whatever this is," Curtis told them, "Rumm knows more about it than we do. If he says run—"

Jean scowled. "But if we keep on running, if we follow him whenever he says, perhaps we'll never learn what's going on. Perhaps—"

"Umm-mm . . . You have a point there. Still . . ."

By that time it was too late, because Rumm had disappeared in the crowd.

"So," Curtis grinned, "we stay."

A dozen men came storming out of the building and into the bright light of the fire. "There he is!" one of them cried.

"Yes—there! But what happened to him? I thought he had a beard—"

"He pulled that trick once before!" Curtis shuddered when he saw the man who said that. It was the giant with the black beard, Geoffrey. "Don't let him fool you. I don't know how he does it, but that's Rumm."

The giant brandished his sword again, came for them. The others followed him.

As they ran, Curtis said, "Why does he keep mistaking me for Rumm?"

"There's a resemblance," Jean told him. "It's hard to tell how strong it is with that big mouse-colored beard all over Rumm's face. But even the names are similar—Rumm and Rome. I don't know, Curtis . . . . Never mind, they're gaining!"

They plowed on through the rings of dancers. Once, a pock-marked face leered at Curtis and he thrust it away, stiff-armed, saw the man stumble, fall, scream as his feet were singed in one of the fires.

I—can't run any—more!" Garlin wailed, panting. "I—wasn't cut out—for—this. Please—"

"You'd better," Curtis said. "They aren't playing with those swords."

Aimlessly, they followed the crooked streets, darted across byways, scattering the revelers as they went. When he looked back, Curtis saw their pursuers—closer each time.

GARLIN WAS a problem. Jean could run like the wind and Curtis' long, loping strides could match her pace. But Garlin puffed along, stumbling, muttering to himself, keeping them back.

Jean said, "I think they'll catch us. Curtis—I'm afraid."

"Well, they haven't got us yet. Here—in here!"

They ducked under an archway, rounded a corner, darted through a doorway. The place was a tavern—possibly Oaksboro's only tavern, because Curtis heard more of the music which sounded like a zither, saw again the same blonde girl.

"Rumm!" she greeted him. "Ah—Rumm! Hey, who's that wench! If you think you can two-time me . . ." She ran at him, beat her fists impotently against his chest. "After I saved you from Geoffrey, too . . ."

Curtis did not know what to do. He thought the tavern might have a back door and they could lose their pursuers in that manner. He'd cheerfully learn the reason for their pursuit another day. But now the blonde girl was clawing all over him, and he couldn't

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bring himself to hit her.

Jean solved the problem for him. She picked up a jug, spilled the icy wine over the blonde's head. The girl whirled, darted for Jean, cursing. "I'll bet they don't even know how to fight in Tir na N'Og," Jean said. She took a square stance, let go with a very unladylike haymaker which caught the blonde flush on her jaw. She collapsed into Curtis' arms, and he let her slide gently to the floor.

"My brother's a boxer," Jean said. "You'll have to meet him some time, Curtis. You'll—"

"Not now, don't talk about it now. Remember, we're still being hunted. A wild, crazy hunt—but they're after us."

Jean smiled. "I don't think they followed us in here, Curtis. Maybe—maybe we can rest a while." She looked at the girl on the floor, a trickle of blood coming from the corner of her lip. "Ooo—did I do that?"

She began to fall, so quickly that Curtis almost didn't reach her in time to catch her. Her brother had taught her how to box, all right—but he hadn't taught her how to take the sight of blood.

Curtis held her in his arms, grinning. He looked around for a chair, saw all the revelers in the tavern were grinning too. Perhaps Jean was right—they needed a rest. Garlin would welcome it, certainly. He changed his mind about the chair though. He held Jean in his arms and suddenly felt like kissing her. That was one thing about this Tir na N'Og place—you seemed to suit the action to the word at the slightest whim. He kissed her on the lips, and her arms went around his neck.

"I almost never faint," she said. "But if I do, it's just for a few seconds. Umm-mm... Again, Curtis."

He obliged, found that it was far better than kissing cold, statuesque Eva.

"Dr. Rome!" President Garlin said.

Curtis laughed and kissed her again, not bothering to put her down. She was light, anyway. They stood that way when Geoffrey plunged into the tavern with his sword, followed by black-robed Druids.

Curtis put Jean down. He almost dropped her.

CHAPTER IV

ANOTHER CURTIS ROME

THE BLONDE got up groggily, wiping her mouth. She sneered at Curtis, then smiled as Geoffrey bellowed triumphantly.

Jean said, "Curtis—Curtis, I wish we weren't here!"

Geoffrey's men, the black-robed Druids, ringed them around with swords. The black-bearded giant dropped his own weapon, and it clattered on the floor. After that, everyone was very quiet.

Geoffrey came forward, slowly. "I think I would like to give you a beating first, Rumm. Yes—"

He lashed out abruptly with his left hand, catching Curtis just below his right ear. Curtis staggered back and the blonde stuck out a dainty, slippered foot. Curtis crashed to the floor, twisted in time to catch Geoffrey's boot on his arm instead of his face. He rolled over thrice, scrambled to his feet. Geoffrey hit him again, a hard, hammering right hand over the heart. Curtis backed into a corner, breathing hard.

"Think you've had enough, eh?" Geoffrey roared. "I haven't even started!" Cocky now, he stalked forward, arms swinging at his sides. Curtis ran in close, suddenly, struck twice at the man's paunch. When

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Geoffrey crouched, grunting, Curtis let go at his jaw with both fists. Blackbeard staggered back, overturned a table, went down with it. He got up slowly.

"Attaboy!" Jean cried, but one of the Druids pricked her back with a sword and she whimpered, was quiet.

Curtis was calm now, and Geoffrey was not. The bigger man lunged at him clumsily, and Curtis began a meticulous destruction of his features. His right hand opened Geoffrey's cheek just under the eye, and when Curtis jabbed again, the man's face became a red smear. Another jab with the left, and Curtis felt cartilege crunch under his fist. Geoffrey's nose didn't look so good.

Two teeth flew from Geoffrey's mouth when Curtis went to work again. Geoffrey sat down on the floor, dazed.

"Have you had enough?" Curtis cried, grinning. His fear of the black-bearded giant suddenly had vanished. Things happened that way in Tir na N'Og. "I am not Rumm," Curtis said. "I am Curtis Rome, but I will fight with Rumm against you any time. Now, do you want more?"

Geoffrey didn't try to get up. He wiped the blood from his face and pointed a trembling finger at Curtis. "Take him," he said.

The Druids closed in.

It occurred to Curtis all at once that he could get them out of this just by concentrating. *We are back on Earth,* he thought. *Garlin, Jean, myself—we are leaving Tir na N'Og now.*

Almost, it didn't work. Jean cowered on one side of him, Garlin on the other. The Druid ring tightened. Garlin mumbled foolishly about men not using swords these day, about all of this being a dream, about wishing he would wake up.

When the first Druid sword touched Curtis' stomach, the man who held it began to waver.

"Kill him!" Geoffrey screamed. "Kill him, quick—he's disappearing again. All of them are!"

The sword bit Curtis' flesh—bit, then did not hurt! He laughed, but he knew to them his laughter would be an insubstantial thing, a ghost of a sound. In all the room, only Jean and Garlin appeared solid. Everything else was fading, fading....

"MY GOSH," said Jean. "We're on the campus."

They were. The moon rode high in Southeastern's sky. They stood on a narrow lane which, Curtis knew, wended its way through woodland not far behind the Campus Road Dormitory.

Someone said, "Where did they come from so fast?"

A youth stood up, but his girl friend sat on the bench, watching them, her lipstick smeared. "Charlie," she said, "they were not here a minute ago. Charlie—oh, Dr. Rome!"

She ran away through the woods, and Charlie followed her. Curtis smiled. Hah! She probably thinks I'll report her out after hours, necking."

"I was out after hours not long ago," Jean told him.

"True, but you weren't necking. You weren't—" He put his arms around her, drew her close, kissed her.

He realized something was amiss with Garlin when the president did not protest. He stepped back, had to use force when Jean clung to him. "Hey, cut it out! What's with prexy?"

"Dr. Rome!" she scolded with mock severity. "You pick up the vernacular so fast—"

"I'm not joking, Jean. Look."

Garlin stood stock still, staring vacantly ahead. Curtis prodded him,

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but he did not budge; ran a hand in front of his eyes, but he did not blink.

"Shock?" Jean guessed.

"Umm-mm. Probably something like that."

"Then we'll have to get him to Dr. Meyers, Curtis. We'll have to—"

"How? And make a clean breast of the whole thing? Who'll believe us?"

"Well, we could just leave him on Meyers' doorstep, ring the bell and run away. Let the doctor try to figure it out if he can. But the important thing is that he'll take care of Mr. Garlin."

Curtis nodded, and Garlin walked willingly enough when they stood on either side of him and held his arms. Curtis looked at his watch. One A.M. Hardly more than forty-eight hours ago he had helped Jean through her dormitory window, yet so much had happened since then. He felt as if he had done more living in those two days than he had done in all of his thirty years before that. His shoulder throbbed and his face hurt from Geoffrey's blows. There was a lot he did not understand, and he sensed this thing was far from finished. It still might hold danger for him—death might lurk either here or in Tir na N'Og. But he looked at Jean, and he was glad for everything.

They rang Dr. Meyers' bell, then ducked back into the bushes as a sleepy Mrs. Meyers opened the door, took one look at Garlin sitting on the doorstep, then ran back inside, yelling her husband's name. "We can go now," Curtis said, taking Jean's hand.

They walked back across campus slowly. "You know," Jean told him, "I'm tired as hell, and I guess I should feel like sleeping. But I think I'd rather just walk, Curtis, with you."

They strolled across the quadrangle and into the woods which long ago the Indians had given a beautiful and many-syllabled name. The scent of growing things was thick on the air, along with the wet fragrance of night in the country, thick like some heady mixture of wine and honey.

Dimly, they heard the sound of music. Saturday night dance. Curtis wondered, briefly, about Eva, then smiled when he thought of her rage.

"What's funny?" Jean wanted to know.

"Nothing. I just have a date down here who'll be awful mad. We professors have Homecoming dates too, you know."

She laughed. "Poor Thomas. He must be frantic. What a stodgy person, Curtis. I'm—I'm glad all this has been happening. Do you know Thomas?"

Curtis told her he did, then related all—that—had happened since first she had broken through to Tir na N'Og. When he finished, they were down by the lake. They heard the gentle lap-lap of the water against the pilings.

"There's a canoe," Curtis said.

"Umm-mm. The lake should be nice by moonlight, Curtis."

Curtis paddled easily, and the light canoe sped across the lake effortlessly, hardly seeming to skim its surface. The moonlight glistened in Jean's hair....

DAWN PROBED the eastern sky with insistent fingers when Curtis hiked her through the same dormitory window.

She whispered, smiling. "Better look out for Mrs. Sparrow this time."

"Seriously, Jean, what will you tell them? The whole town knows you've been missing for two days—"

"Well, I don't know. I could—I know! I went to visit my brother in Baltimore, suddenly. I'll wire him

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and he'll back me up without asking questions. They'll be angry because I didn't ask permission to leave town, but that's all. How does it sound?"

Curtis told her it sounded fine, kissed her quickly, then lowered himself from the window. He whistled all the way back to his room.

The landlady met him at the stairwell. "I'd say you had a full evening, Dr. Rome."

"You don't know how full, Mrs. Clunny. I got lost in the woods."

"Um-mmm. You know that Miss Walters person—"

"Eva?"

"Certainly. She called three times, was furious the last time and hung up. Well, I told her I can't keep track of the comings and goings of my roomers. I really can't, can I, Dr. Rome?"

He agreed with her hastily, but smiled when he realized she was doing a pretty good job of it now. He bid her goodnight, climbed the stairs to the third floor, opened his door.

"It's about time, Curtis Rome!" The voice said. The same voice which had spoken in his head, or Rumm's voice in Tir na N'Og. But now it wasn't in his head and he wasn't in Tir na N'Og. He crossed the room to his night table, flicked on the lamp. Rumm sat in his lounging chair—he could only assume it was Rumm because the room was dimly lit and it was difficult to see clearly—smoking one of his cigars.

"Not bad at all," Rumm told him, rolling smoke around with his tongue.

"How'd you get here?"

Rumm laughed. "Don't tell me you still have to ask that? The same way you did, Curtis. Both of us can come and go at will between here and Tir na N'Og, and we can take people, too."

Curtis couldn't deny that. He waited for Rumm to continue.

"I'll tell it to you fast, Curtis, because it's quite simple. Tir na N'Og exists on one spatio-temporal plane, Earth on another. For all I know, there may be an infinity of them, but that doesn't matter. Consider—there's an infinity of probabilities in any course of action, and any one of them could be fact on any one of an infinity of continua. Earth is just one, Tir na N'Og is just another. All right so far?"

CURTIS NODDED, frowning. "I think so. Then you mean there might be a world, say, in which I'm married. Only I'm not married in this world—a different set of probabilities happened. Right?"

"Not quite. The people in each world are different. You, Curtis Rome, probably don't exist in any of the others—because you could only be duplicated if, throughout humanity's history, the same people mated. One change—just one, mind you—and the whole setup would be different. See?"

Rumm walked across the floor to the overhead light, switched it on. Curtis stared, mouth agape.

Rumm said, "I took the liberty of shaving off my beard with your razor, and I'm wearing one of your suits. Hope you don't mind."

Rumm was not—Rumm. There, sitting cross-legged in Curtis Rome's lounging chair, smiling, smoking Curtis' cigar, was Curtis Rome! Complete to the last detail. Curtis could have been looking into a mirror.

He couldn't speak for a time. He just looked at Rumm—and at himself.

Rumm flicked the ashes from his cigar. "Hard for you to tell with my beard, but Geoffrey certainly could see through it. The million-to-one shot happened, Curtis—on your world and mine, the same people mated, the

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same germ-plasm merged—we're identical. Different character traits caused by the difference in culture, but we're identical.

"Which gives us a natural affinity. Which makes it possible for us to bridge the gap between the worlds through a linkage of our psi-powers, or to take other people across it. It couldn't happen any other way."

Curtis was able to speak now, but his voice sounded like a hoarse croaking in his ears. "Then—then that's what the Druids wanted you for?"

"Of course. Their power depends to a large extent on phony magic. But with me they could have the real thing. They could appear or disappear at will, moving between the worlds, taking things with them. Incidentally, Curtis, the basic difference between your world and mine is a simple one. Here, Christianity was born, carried the ancient Hellenic culture to the modern world. In Tir na N'Og, there is no Christianity. The Druids spread out over the world from England with their mystic rites, and they haven't done as good a job. In a lot of ways Tir na N'Og is a primitive place.

"Anyway, I didn't count on one thing. Someone else in Tir na N'Og has the same power—one other man!"

Curtis could only accept all this as fact. He had been through too much which it explained to deny any of it. Now he said the one word: "Who?"

"Geoffrey, damn his hide! I didn't know about it, but there was more than just our affections for Jara which made him my enemy. He didn't want anyone to share the power with him. He got to the Druids first, showed them his power, told them I was a fakir, as you'd say in this world. Naturally, his proof convinced them, and he ordered me destroyed...."

"They almost got me instead," Curtis told him. "I guess they could picture me with a beard more than I could picture you without one. All I knew was that you looked familiar. So—what now?"

Rumm frowned. "Ah, that is a good question! Curtis, let us say I see the evil of my ways by watching another at work with them. Geoffrey can—and will—steal from this world, making things disappear by taking them to Tir na N'og. Or people. Let a wench here strike his fancy: he'll take her. Murder: he can murder in either world with impunity. He can set himself up as a veritable god, Curtis—with the wealth of both worlds at his fingertips. You've seen Geoffrey—would you like that?"

No, Curtis wouldn't—for all those sound general reasons, and for a very personal one as well. Geoffrey might want to wreak vengeance on him, or on Jean, and flitting between the worlds, who could stop him?

Curtis said, "I'll help you, of course. But what can we do?"

Rumm spread his hands out wide. "We'll have to sit back and wait. That will be the worst part of it. Then, when Geoffrey strikes, we'll know. But only then—after he strikes...."

CHAPTER V

MIDSUMMER EVE

CURTIS WITHDREW several hundred dollars from his bank account in the morning—almost depleting the account entirely. With it, Rumm took the bus to Parsons Corners, where Curtis knew he would get a room and wait. They couldn't chance being seen together, and this way, that worry at least would be off their shoulders. They could communicate by phone, of course, but Curtis realized it might be some time

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before Geoffrey made his presence felt on Earth.

A special delivery letter came from Eva before noon. Curtis tore the envelope open quickly, read: *Curtis: Don't try to stop me. I'm taking the train home because I'm convinced it's better this way. No questions, please. No recriminations. Just farewell. Farewell! Eva.*

Curtis smiled. Dramatic—like everything else about her. Theatrical farewell. If that's what Eva wanted, fine. As a matter of fact, Curtis was quite relieved. If all his other problems were solved so readily... Good old Eva: bless her flair for theatrics!

Curtis picked up his phone, asked for the police, got Peters. "Hello," he said. "This is Rome."

"Rome? Mr. Rome—I'll be danged! We was looking all over for you. Didn't think of your room; escaped guys never go back where they can be found so easily. And you'll never guess who's here with me now."

"No? Who?"

"Mr. Dunbar, remember him? And that girl, Miss Rogers. It seemed she went to visit her cousin. Brother? Her brother in Baltimore, Mr. Rome."

Curtis made an appropriate click-clacking noise with his tongue.

"Yes, sir, that's what I said. You didn't take her after all. Fancy that, but then, that's what you always said. Want to come down here, Mr. Rome? Please?"

"Trouble?" Curtis demanded.

"Well, I don't think so. Fact is, Hawkins and his men went home to Parsons Corners. But me and Mr. Dunbar want to see you. Coming? Please?"

Curtis said yes, hung up. He was there inside of fifteen minutes. He said hello to Peters, acknowledged Dunbar's curt nod, greeted Jean quite formally.

"Good morning, Dr. Rome," Jean said. "I've been telling Tom and Mr. Peters where I've been. Did you know that they thought you'd...done something with me, Dr. Rome?"

He smiled. "You're telling me, Miss Rogers."

Dunbar's voice was business-like. "I still don't like you, Rome. I'll be frank about it—"

"But you sure acted silly!" Jean tittered.

"Yes. Yes. Perhaps I was...a bit hasty. I'm willing to let bygones be bygones, Rome, provided you are. I'm sorry for any name-calling I might have done, and I'm willing to forget your unwarranted, vicious attack."

Curtis laughed. "It was neither unwarranted nor vicious. But I'll accept your apology." Dunbar—now that he had made a fool of himself—did not want to publicize this any further. But there was no need for Curtis to be tactful.

PETERS WAS quite relieved that the matter had been settled so simply. He muttered something about thinking someone might disappear again, but Curtis kept his face straight. "Disappear? I wonder what you mean by that, Peters."

Curtis watched Dunbar take Jean's arm and steer her out the door to his waiting convertible. For a moment Curtis felt a twang of jealousy, but Jean winked at him as she skipped through the doorway, and Curtis knew everything would be fine between them when Dunbar left town this evening. For now, well, it would be pointless to let the man know they had anything more than a casual acquaintance. It might set him out upon a road of questions which had no answers. At least none that they could give.

Back in his room, Curtis had one more phone call to make. He dialed President Gallin's house, heard the

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butler's familiar voice. But the butler seemed rattled.

"Hello," said Curtis, "I'd like to speak with the President. Dr. Rome talking."

"Oh—Dr. Rome. He can't talk now. Doctor's orders."

"Eh?" Curtis demanded.

"It's terrible, sir," the butler wailed. "Mr. Garlin seems to be suffering from some kind of shock, and—"

"Serious?"

"No, sir—thank Heaven for that. But it will indispose Mr. Garlin for some time. Very strange, if I may say so, sir. You remember how he seemed to disappear suddenly?"

Curtis said that he remembered.

"Apparently he was wandering somewhere in the country all day and all night. His clothing is torn, has brambles all over it. Strangest part of it is, sir, that he doesn't remember a thing. Dr. Meyers assures me it's common enough—the President has had some unpleasant experience which his mind has rejected. He'll need some rest, sir, but he'll be on his feet again soon, and Dr. Meyers insists we do not probe to find whatever it was. Much better this way, sir."

Curtis agreed, said he hoped prexy felt better soon, hung up. It was better this way, he knew. Garlin's mind was too prosaic to accept what had happened. It had withdrawn from the experience. After Garlin had recovered, he would remember nothing of it—which was better for all concerned.

Somehow, Curtis felt uneasy. Things were going too smoothly. Eva had sunken out of the picture with her righteous indignation. Dunbar had dropped all charges, was leaving town at nightfall. Prexy's memory had rejected the adventure in Tir na N'Og.

Curtis, then, had nothing at all to worry about. And yet, and yet....

ON MONDAY Jean told Curtis she had broken things off with Dunbar. He was unhappy, but he would get over it, she said. Curtis called Rumm in Parson's Corners, but his double had nothing to report. Curtis felt strange speaking to him on the phone, but Rumm's ability to get into his mind only worked from Tir na N'Og to Earth. Rumm had taken Jean and Garlin to see what the people of this world were like, now was here to see the world first hand. But with a purpose. The newspapers, the radio—these could keep him informed, and he'd know when Geoffrey struck.

The bright crisp spring days lengthened, became warmer, baked Southeastern in the strong sun of coming summer. Curtis spent all his spare time with Jean, remembered those days as the most satisfying of his life.

Tir na N'Og and Geoffrey faded into an unreal dream. It once had happened, yes—but long and long ago, it seemed. June now— and if Geoffrey had wanted to strike, surely he would have done so. Two weeks to June 23rd—Midsummer Eve. Curtis knew the great fires had been burning in Oaksboro and elsewhere in Tir na N'Og in preparation for the wild yearly festival of the Druids.

A week—and nothing. Rumm called from time to time, but he seemed secretive.

At five P. M., June 23rd, he seemed very excited. "Curtis! Curtis, I think I have it."

"Suddenly, just like that?"

"No. No, I thought so for some time, but I wanted to be sure. Now—consider. On April 10th, a man named Jeffrey Udell was murdered in your city of Chicago. Udell was a shoe salesman with no known enemies, and the weapon could have been a large knife. A sword, Curtis! They had nothing to work on, and the murderer went unapprehended.

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"I say it was Geoffrey. He found his double, made some kind of proposition to him, was rejected. They had a fight, this Udell was killed. You follow?"

"Yes, of course. Only your evidence is mighty slim—"

"No, there's more. From April 12th through April 20th, Chicago was the scene of a score of unsolved crimes. Valuables stolen, mostly, with no trace. No trace whatever. Which is exactly what would have happened had they been taken to Tir na N'Og!

"After that, the trail moves to St. Louis. Same thing, Curtis. Larceny on a grand scale—but this is important: never money. Always jewelry and the like. You couldn't use United States money in Tir na N'Og! New Orleans next and the same thing.

"Finally, the wave of unsolved crimes moves up the East Coast. Miami in May, Jacksonville, Atlanta, Charlotte. In June, Durham, Winston-Salem, Roanoke; Richmond three days ago. He's coming, Curtis. I'll be right over!"

Richmond—less than a hundred miles away. The trail was obviously Geoffrey's, and now Geoffrey hovered close. Southeastern parallelled Oaksboro in Tir na N'Og, which might mean that Geoffrey wanted to return home at this point. But it also might mean that Geoffrey was ready for his vengeance....

THE VACATION was over. Tir na N'Og seemed very real again—too real. Curtis reached into a drawer of his dresser, found the snub-nosed automatic he had gotten for this eventuality, slipped it into a pocket of his jacket.

When the phone rang, Curtis jumped a foot. "Hello!" he barked into it.

"Curtis—Curtis, this is Jean. Can you come, quick?"

"What's the matter?"

"A man's been prowling around the dormitory, asking qustions about me, frightening the girls. Mrs. Sparrow has called the police but the man's outside my window now. Curtis, he's tall and dark. No beard, but he could be—"

Curtis slammed the receiver down, bolted out the door. "Someone's called about you," Mrs. Clunny said, but Curtis didn't stop to listen.

He tore across campus like a man possessed, half-heard the students remarking that young Dr. Rome must have put one or two too many under his belt. He kocked a coed down on the quadrangle, stopped to help her pick up her books, thought better of it, ran on. She seemed very surprised.

He met Mrs. Sparrow outside the dormitory. "Why, good afternoon, Dr. Rome. What's all the excitement?"

"Where's Jean?"

"Jean? You mean Jean Rogers?"

"Yes—never mind!" Curtis elbowed past her and ran into the building.

"Dr. Rome—you can't go in there! The girls—"

He found Jean's room, didn't knock. Jean's room-mate, a Marilyn Somebody, was just getting into her slip. "Hey—what're you doing in here?" She clutched a dress to her bosom.

Curtis apologized, told her he was looking for Jean, told her also that it was very important.

"Well, funny thing. This guy comes around, asks for Rumm's girl-friend. I say Rome, you mean Dr. Rome, and he says, probably. He's been hanging around all day, then he's talking to Jean through the window a few minutes ago. I go to take a shower and when I come back, both of them are gone. I guess she went someplace with him, huh? You know, I think Jean was scared while she was

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talking to him. Funny—"

Curtis heard Mrs. Sparrow's heels click-clacking through the hall, heard the woman reach their door, knock. "I'm not here," Curtis hissed to the girl. "Please, tell her I'm not here!"

"He isn't here!" Marilyn called loudly. She would not, Curtis decided, make a very good actress.

"Mind if I come in, Marilyn? I've got to—"

For weeks Curtis had not thought about his ability to cross into Tir na N'Og. But now he prayed to whatever powers held sway over that ability. If he still had it—he had to!

Marilyn stared at him. She dropped her dress. A subdued scream escaped her throat, but it was choked off as she began to fade.

Mrs. Sparrow came into the room, a wavering unreal phantom, like the hallway behind her, like the room itself. "Marilyn, you look as if you'd seen a ghost. What's that, what's that over there? Smoke? Umm-mm.... Funny, it's gone...."

The cloud which was Marilyn fell to the floor as Curtis stepped all the way through into Tir na N'Og, losing sight of her completely.

OFF ACROSS the plain he could see the rambling structures of Oaksboro, and even in daylight the Midsummer Fire was a fierce pulsing core of light. But the sun was low, soon daylight would be gone. In its stead, Midsummer Eve...

Curtis loped into Oaksboro, his long legs eating up distance at a good clip. Everyone in town, it seemed, was carting wood to the central plaza, to heap it on the fire. Clothed in a fantastic array of costumes, none of them paid Curtis any heed.

He found some branches, toted them on his shoulder, reached the central plaza. Wave on wave of heat came out to meet him. He was drenched with sweat by the time he reached the fire's periphery.

The cowled old hag stood there, directing the fuel-bearers with one long, withered arm. "This way, this way, fool! Ah, there. Yes, there! Now get more.... Ahh!"

People danced and sang around him, shouted, played, fought. "A girl!" he cried. "I seek a girl."

The hag looked at him, grinning toothlessly. "And you'll have her before this night is over, my lad. Patience."

"No. One girl. A newcom—"

The crowd swept him away then, roaring laughter all about him. He thought he heard the hag say something about the wench Geoffrey had brought, couldn't be sure.

He found a young woman, kirtle torn open to waist, singing. He grabbed her shoulders, shook her. "I'm looking for—"

"Let go of me! Let—" She raked at his face with her nails, half-heartedly. She flung bronzed arms around his neck. "What difference?" she said, smiling.

Someone spun Curtis around. He was aware of a great red-bearded face, a terrible scowl. "She's mine!"

"Sure—" Curtis began.

"But you thought you could take her, eh? Eh, is that it?"

Curtis fumbled in his pocket for the automatic but his hands were trembling. Red-beard lifted his sword high, brought it down in a wicked arc. Curtis sidestepped desperately, and the flat of the blade crashed against his temple, created a roaring in his ears. He stumbled, heard more laughter, fell....

NIGHT. Chaos of sound, of movement, of throbbing ache in his head, of bright shimmering firelight. He brought his hand away from his head, sticky, got his feet, swayed.

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Someone, a girl copper-colored in the fire's glow, danced him around. He fell again, lay panting, sobbing, gathering strength. Against a wall, he pulled himself upright. He did not think he could walk ten steps.

Off to one side, an old man drank wine from a bottle. Curtis pulled it from him, put bottle to lips, drank. It ran down his throat like fire, burned his stomach, roared into his blood. He felt better, drank again—and again. He was giddy, but the strength flowed back into him, came with a rush. He threw the empty bottle away, found himself chuckling when the old man cursed. He ran to the fire.

Someone held his arm. "Rumm! You—"

"Yes. I could put two and two together. I realized you'd be here. Curtis, you know what they're doing?"

"Celebrating their festival, Midsummer Eve—"

"More than that. Geoffrey could procure riches from Earth, could give the Druids a means of disappearance at will. But he could do one thing more."

"What?"

"Get them human sacrifice! It was that way in the old days. But it hasn't been for many hundreds of years. The Druids want it, the people don't. But if the sacrificial maiden is an alien—"

"Jean!"

"Curtis, I will stay here and fight this obscenity all my life. I will—"

"What about now? I don't care what you do all your life. Jean—"

They ran to the fire. The old hag was chanting a song which long and long ago had spanned the gap between the worlds, now remained only in one, in Tir na N'Og. Cowled Druids dragged a great wicker basket, big as a coffin, to the flames, chanting as they went. A figure in it, cowering, clothed all in green of earth, earth sacrifice to the sky god. Jean!

Curtis tugged the automatic from his pocket, lunged forward. "Down!" he cried. "Put that basket down!"

TWO DRUIDS stood in his path, swords raised. They charged down upon him. He heard Jean screaming, the old hag chanting her song. He had no compunctions whatever—he fired the automatic once and once again, felt it kick back against his palm. The Druids fell at his feet.

Curtis fired again. The shots crashed in his ears, made his head throb. Druids fell, but more came with their swords. The gun clicked on an empty chamber. When it clicked a second time, Curtis hurled it at the nearest Druid, saw it batter the man's nose against his face. Curtis took his sword as he fell.

Somewhere, Rumm had picked up a weapon. They hacked forward. Curtis held the sword with both hands, swinging wildly, roaring his rage, beating the Druids back before his mad rush. They must have feared the roaring weapon, the tiny thing that spit fire and death—did not know that Curtis had thrown it away, empty.

They gave ground before him yelling, clawing at one another in their haste, and Rumm hacked down those that were uncertain.

Curtis reached the basket, tore at its wicker with his hands, clawed a hole in it. Dimly, he was aware that Rumm covered him with flashing sword. He pulled Jean out, sobbing, all covered with green. "Curtis, darling..."

Briefly, he held her in his arms, stroked her hair. Then Rumm was tugging at his elbow. "Geoffrey—there goes Geoffrey!"

He had rescued Jean, yes—and

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now, ere the Druids could get at them, they could return to Earth, leave Tir na N'Og forever. But what good would it do, with Geoffrey loose? He could work his magic again, strike when Curtis wasn't ready....

They plunged back through the surging revelers. The crowd did not know yet what had happened, still brought wood to the fire. The hag chanted. Some of the women looked at the dead Druids, at the living ones cowering in confusion, did not understand, continued their dancing.

They followed Geoffrey away from the plaza, down a street, across a by-way, out beyond Oaksboro on the wide plain. They lost him there.

Curtis felt infinitely weary. "Now what, Rumm? Do we go back to Oaksboro, clean up your Druids? What then? Do we return to Earth, forget about all this until Geoffrey strikes?"

Rumm shrugged, began to say something. But something thudded beside Curtis. Rumm's words turn into a gurgle. He fell. Curtis knelt by his side, unbelieving, saw the knife in his breast. Dressed in flannels, it was himself lying there, Rumm....

Jean whimpered softly. "Rumm," Curtis said. "Rumm!"

"If you can get Geoffrey, perhaps it's...better this way. When I...die, the genetic bond will be gone. The doorway between Tir na N'Og and Earth will be closed forever once you return. Who knows, Curtis? Perhaps one of us...would have...been tempted. It is better...this way, eh? Much better. The doorway was not meant to be opened...." Rumm lay back, sighed once, relaxed. He was dead.

Stiffly, Curtis stood up. He looked about him in the darkness. "Geoffrey!" he called, and again, "Geoffrey!"

Laughter. "Rumm—or Rome—or whoever you are, I think one of us must die. I think—"

The figure stalked toward them, sword raised high. Curtis lifted his own weapon, pushed Jean back and away. Then Geoffrey was upon him.

It seemed an unreal dream. Cut and slash and hack, hammer away clumsily at a master swordsman! Don't drop your sword under shock of contact, you'll never get a chance to pick it up.

There, there! Back, away—he almost had you then. Now, forward—swish.... That was close.

Wild surge—and strike, strike! A clatter, a sword on the ground, Geoffrey standing there, empty-handed, cringing. At him....

GEOFFREY BEGAN to fade, laughing. His laughter faded too, and soon Curtis stood alone with Jean. "He's gone!" she cried.

"Sure, he'd have been dead if he weren't Earth...."

He held Jean's hand, watched Tir na N'Og shimmer for the last time. But Rumm had been wrong, of course. If Geoffrey could move at will between the worlds after his double was dead, then Curtis could, too. There was no closing the doorway.

The Southeastern quadrangle shimmered into being, pulsed with an unreal light. Curtis hardly had time to orient himself. He heard Jean cry a warning, and then something was on him from behind. He fell, twisted around, felt fingers at his throat, saw his sword off on the grass half a dozen feet away. He tried to gasp, to empty his tortured lungs, fill them again—and couldn't. Tighter closed Geoffrey's hands, and the man hardly felt Jean clawing at his back.

Curtis struck up, feebly, at the face above him, but Geoffrey shook the blows off, thrust back his head and roared laughter. Dimly, sounds from the dark campus around them.

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"Johnnie! There, on the guadrangle, what's that?"

"Two men fighting! Let's see."

Feet pounding across grass.

Geoffrey's laughter, wild in his ears, rising and ebbing. Curtis reached up, got his hands at Geoffrey's cheeks, and the lips opening with laughter, forced them in. He felt something rip, horribly, as he pulled his hands apart, heard Geoffrey's laughter end in a scream.

Curtis pushed clear, clambered to his feet. Geoffrey sulked away on the grass, but came back suddenly, Curtis' sword in his hand. He struck with it, but Curtis ducked in under the blow, bowled him over, felt him trying to bring the sword around again.

Breast to breast, they fought over it. Geoffrey's face was a bloody ruin, his wild laughter a terrible sound in Curtis' ears. They fought.

Curtis felt the point of the sword at his throat, twisted, turned away, pushed the hands holding the weapon, heard a grunt. He pushed again, rolled over, felt Geoffrey writhing under him, felt the sword pulling away suddenly.

ONCE, AND once only, Geoffrey screamed Rumm's name. Then he fell back, the sword buried in his chest half way to the hilt. For a moment he lay thus, and then he shimmered. He faded, became smoke, less than smoke—a shadow. Dead, he returned for the last time to Tir na N'Og, the sword still in his breast.

Curtis sobbed. He sat down on the grass, took in great breaths of air. Jean crouched beside him, pillowed his head on her breast.

The couple reached them, and the boy Johnnie said: "What's going on here?"

"A fight?" the girl wanted to know.

Curtis smiled, put his arms around Jean, drew her close. "Do we look like we'd be fighting?"

They mumbled, apologized, walked away.

Curtis said, "I wonder. I wonder... The doorway is not closed. It has a certain fascination.... Will we return again to Tir na N'Og?"

Jean shook her head severely. "Rumm, poor Rumm. He had the answer. It was a doorway not meant to be opened, Curtis. Ever."

"Well—I don't know. Just to look, to explore—"

"No!"

He kissed her then. "I suppose you're right. After we're married, we'll have a lot to do anyway."

She nodded happily. "Like raising a family."

He told her yes, like that, like raising a family. But within his head he knew the power resided, waiting. He wondered....

The End

Russia's newest weapon will be the deadliest of all. Ironically enough, we once had it and threw it away!

Milton Lesser's latest classic, "He Fell Among Thieves", tells the story of one man's fight against the diabolical plots of an entire nation—to kill the freedom-loving countries of the world.

Don't miss the March 1952 issue of

FANTASTIC ADVENTURES

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READER'S PAGE

LETTER FOR A HUSBAND

Dear Editor:

Well, I did it! I've been reading AMAZING STORIES for a few issues, and your advertisements for FANTASTIC ADVENTURES finally convinced me to try an issue. I told myself it couldn't possibly be as good, but I was in for a distinct surprise—it ALMOST was!

I say almost, but not quite. I have before me right now the latest AMAZING and the latest FANTASTIC, and I hope you don't mind if I compare them (the October number of each).

The best story in both magazines was "Forty Days Has September" by Lesser—head and shoulders above all the others, too. Incidentally, I think it was a story by the same author which got me to like AMAZING STORIES in the first place, so I guess you'll have one satisfied customer as long as you keep printing such material!

Crowding one another for second place in both magazines were "Cube Sinister" by Stangland and "Alias Adam" by McGreevey (this one was the best story in FANTASTIC, but not nearly as good as the "Forty Days" novel). After those I'd rate "The Laughter of Shiru" and "Old Spacemen Never Die", by Vance and Jakes, respectively. Also good were: "You Take the High Road" by Marlowe; "Death's Derelict" by Geier; "The Perfect Hideout" by Vance.

Thus, in a month of science fiction there were only two stories I didn't like—"Medusa Was a Lady" by Tenn and "A Handful of Dust" by Jorgensen. About the former—well, I don't know. It was just one of those things. Mr. Tenn had a good idea in using mythology to motivate a science-fiction story, but he didn't carry the idea out well. Mostly, it was unconvincing.

I think you can see what I mean if you compare it to Mr. Lesser's novel in AMAZING: In Mr. Lesser's story, everything seemed real, it seemed to be happening just as he told it. The reverse was true in Mr. Tenn's novel: I just didn't believe it. And I don't think the answer lies in the fact that "Forty Days" took place in the present and Medusa in the past. No—I've found that in science fiction as any place else, some authors can make you believe and some cannot. Some can be completely convincing and you live every minute of what they write breathlessly, while others fail in that respect. The result, like Mr. Tenn's Medusa story, is a little on the dull side for all its action.

There only remains "A Handful of Dust"—and it was a very good job of its kind, but the reason I didn't like it too much is because I like science fiction, not fantasy.

And now, I'd better sign off—with the warning that I'll probably be around again next issue. (Incidentally, I have a prediction to make: if a letter of mine gets into print, I think I can get my husband to read AMAZING and FANTASTIC!)

(Mrs.) D. P. Lynn
Merrick, New York

Welcome—Mr. Lynn!

We take exception, however, to Mrs. Lynn's criticism of "Medusa Was A Lady". In our opinion, in addition to its being straight fantasy science fiction, it is a clever satire of Greek mythology. ... Ed.

AND SO WE RATE...

Dear LES:

After reading the last 2 issues of AS and FA I thought I would send you a letter. Here are my ratings on your stories:

(1) "Somewhere I'll Find You". Good theme, but how could the people of the first level be sure their world was the first-level earth if there was an infinite number of earths?

(2) "Return Engagement". Nice ending.

(3) "Checkmate for Aradjo"

(4) "The Hatchetman"

(500th) "The Little Creeps".

I have not liked two of Miller's three stories. "Secret of the Death Dome" was tops, though.

Leo Summers' drawing looks a lot like Rod Ruth's.

And I'm willing to bet that:

Henry and Enoch Sharp are one and the same.

Milt Lesser is Stephen Marlowe.

Rog Phillips and P. F. Costello are the same.

I saw the best science-fiction movie to date, "The Day the Earth Stood Still". Sensational. It sounded a lot like "The Green Man" you ran a couple of years back.

E. Bruce Yaches writes a mean feature. So, for that matter, do all your other

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filler-authors.

Suggestions:

Why not rewrite some of the Burroughs stories? How about getting some more stories on Atlantis, etc.?

Here, now, are my ratings on the FA stories:

(1) "He Knew What He Wanted". Gooood.
(2) "Jongor Fights Back". Goood.
(3) "No Price Too Great". Ahh.
(4) "Deadly Cargo".
(5) "Never Shoot a Stranger".

In 1948 you ran a lot of stories about World War III and world peace. How about some more?

Letter Answering Department:

Terry Carr— Read my guesses on pen names.

C. A. Nelson, Jr.— Maybe it was a slow meteor???

Art:

Robert Gibson Jones is the best artist you have, but most of his illos have nothing to do with the story. Lawrence (who is he?) is good; Leo Summers is fair.

Authors:

How about a Rog Phillips novel? With him using his right name, not P. F. Costello.

The worst story and issue I ever read was the September FA—Fairman's "Tarmuts" stank. The only good part was the Reader's Page.

More letter-answering:

Miss Gingold: Didn't you read "The Face Beyond the Veil" and "The Justice of Tor"? "Space Cadet" is fair, but if you want to waste your time watch "Capt. Video" or "Buck Rogers".

D. Stewart: Will there be a third letter? "The Thing" should not be classified as science fiction, but as a horror picture.

With the hope that you restore back covers, and throw out those ads, I am your faithful reader,

Name Withheld
Highland Park, New Jersey

HE DIDN'T GO FAR ENOUGH....

Dear LES:

I have been reading FANTASTIC ADVENTURES since it had nearly twice as many pages and was almost three times as thick. During this time I have noticed a steady increase in quality (though a decrease in quantity, regrettably). Unfortunately, the same can't be said of AMAZING STORIES. It has shown strong periods and hit slumps. It showed progress soon after Howard Browne took over, then dropped. Now, it seems on the upgrade. However, to return to the subject at hand —namely, FA—I shall afford you the benefit of my comments on the November issue.

Cover: very smooth. It looked like something out of a slick. In fact, I saw something a great deal like it in the *Sat. Eve. Post.* The gentleman was considerably farther into the room, however. I note all of your cover artists seem to have appropri-

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ated Gibson's sparkling effect. Commercial, but not unattractive. Speaking of Gibson, if I remember correctly he claims never to have painted a nude. I refer him to his cover paintings for the October 1947 and January 1948 editions of FA. Both ladies are quite nude.

The stories are rated thusly by this reader:

(1) "He Knew All the Answers", by Dallas Ross. I was intrigued by the basic premise of this one. I read it through twice. Let's have more by Dallas Ross—whoever that's a pen name for.

(2) "Remember Not To Die", by Rog Phillips. A well-written, thoughtful story with the stock Phillips characters.

Strange that the illustrator Dorset should die in an auto accident after drawing a picture of an impending auto accident. He had, as you say, shown a great deal of promise. Particularly in the illos for "Excalibur and the Atom". However, frankly, I thought he was a pen name for Art Editor Summers, which is perhaps understandable if he was a student of Summers. Is Navarro a real person, too? The art of Summers, Dorset and Navarro is incredibly similar.

(3) "Mission Accomplished", by Wallace Umphrey. Nice idea, nice writing, a very nice story.

(4) "The Girl in the Golden Wig", by Chester S. Geier. Extremely good writing and characterization. The basic premise is hardly original, but variations on an old theme are nice. This story is a relief from the type of thing that Chet has been turning out—futurized Westerns/that were some of the worst stories he or anyone else ever foisted off on an unsuspecting stf magazine.

(5) "Anything Your Heart Desires", by Stephen Marlowe. Another nice idea, but the writing style was reminiscent of the more hacky space opera. Still, a fairly good story.

(6) "The Man Who Stopped at Nothing", by Paul W. Fairman. I liked the novel well enough, but it simply failed to strike me as being outstanding. The characterization was either completely ignored or passed over lightly. An author can't please everybody, I guess.

As you can see, I liked all the stories in this issue. This is definitely unique. I usually like a few stories, find others fair, and really dislike one or two. Obviously, I considered this one of your better issues.

Probably some readers will consider it one of your poorer ones. I also imagine the majority will rate the stories considerably different from me, too. For instance, I doubt if they will rate a short-short first, as I did. Probably the first-rated story will be "Remember Not to Die", because it is by Rog Phillips, a favorite and talented author, and because it is a longer story, thus making for stronger identification of readers with characters, and pandering to the uniquely American concept of bigness makes greatness. Then the Fairman novel because of the last two of the above reasons and because it is an entertaining story. Then probably the Geier novelette and, finally, the shorts.

Even though this is probably a minority report, I submit it for my own amusement and your possible information.

In closing, I would like to compliment you, L. E. Shaffer, on the excellent job you do in editing FA. I wonder, however, why you apparently want to hide one aspect of your identity. There are many talented and successful editors having this aspect.

To risk being trite, continue the good work.

Jim Harmon
427 East 8th Street
Mount Carmel, Illinois

Why, whatever do you mean? ..... Ed.

HE WANTS TO LAUGH

Dear Editor:

This is my first excuse to drop you a letter. I've been reading up on some back-issue stf. Wow! Meyer's "The Shades of Toffee"! On my part, I'd welcome more of the same humorous stories. Any chance of getting some in your mag? I know Meyer has written more about Toffee. Possibly some readers could locate some for me.

For some time now, you've been publishing stories that might become real classics of science fiction. However, how about better, clipped pages that rank with your stories and inside illustrations as good as your covers?

Another good thing you have that's rapidly becoming more popular in stf mags is the short-short filler articles.

Charles Thornton
548 Cypress
San Bruno, California

PRAISE FROM A PANNER IS PRAISE INDEED

Dear LES:

By now, your column must have had thousands of the "this is my first letter" type of letter. And no doubt you and your readers must have been amused at the reasons given that caused those first letters to be written. So this "first" will merely be another to add to the list.

I've read stf for over 10 years and don't follow any particular pattern in selecting stf pulps—I buy 'em all! Several times I've been tempted to write, but it was to pan, not to praise. Some of the stuff I've read made one wish that the time had never been spent on them, though I must make it clear that they weren't necessarily your publications.

Well, as I say, I was tempted to write. But my ideas weren't constructive, and

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when I get sarcastic...oh, brother! So I forebore.

Now that I have at last lifted the veil of silence, you can be pretty sure that only something extremely important could bring it about. "The Man Who Stopped at Nothing" did the trick. If Fairman can produce more of this calibre of fiction, then by all means let's have it. I trust he will be able to maintain the same high standards in later productions.

His story merits a solid 5-star rating. As far as I am concerned, no other story has ever come near it in entertainment value. It's tops. Had to be, to shake a letter out of me!

Regarding this "sex or no sex" business—I'm all in favor of sex—INSIDE the mag, but prefer a conservative cover. Some covers are so utterly lurid that one hates to take them off the bookshelf. But inside the mag, that's a different story; go ahead, pour on the sex, illos as well. Just listen to me and FANTASTIC will be barred from the mails in no time!

Only fault with the illo at the beginning of the story was that the sweet young thing had too much back showing. Now, if she'd been facing the street—see what I mean? The artist could have added so much more detail!

But this is incidental. You can't have everything. And the obvious holes in the story couldn't be helped much, either, without loss of plot, etc. No doubt an odd, and I do mean odd, reader will go after this one. I'll surely be surprised if no one pans it. But I thought it was absolutely tops.

You are well aware of how people talk of trimmed pages. My suggestions, folks, is that next time you are out scavenging stf, buy 4 or 5 mags at once, then get on good terms with your local printer, and you will probably be able to convince him that he ought to trim your edges as a service to the trade. Most cutting machines will trim a minimum of 500 sheets at a time, and the length of time it actually takes—one full minute or less!

This will leave you with 4 or 5 fully trimmed mags at one fell swoop. And how do I know? I'm a printer. Been doing this for years.

Again, let's have more Fairman.

Tom Birmingham
681 Dovercourt Road
Toronto 4, Ontario, Canada

You've an idea there, Tom. Any of you fans tried trimming your edges this way? ..... *Ed.*

SCIENCE FICTION—OR HORROR?

Dear Editor:

According to Constable G. Piddock's belief, most SF fans like horror stories. He thinks more than 80% do. Do you agree? If so, I guess I'm more peculiar than ever. Most of my friends think I'm slightly "off

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1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Ziff-Davis Publishing Co., 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; Editor, Howard Browne, 366 Madison Ave., New York 17, N. Y.; Managing editor, Lila Shaffer, 366 Madison Ave., New York 17, N. Y.; Business manager, G. E. Carney, 366 Madison Ave., New York 17, N. Y.

2. The owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual member, must be given.) Ziff-Davis Publishing Co., 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; William B. Ziff, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; B. G. Davis, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; A. Ziff, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; S. Davis, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.

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5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

G. E. CARNEY,
Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1951.
[SEAL] Helene Bullock,
Notary Public.

(My commission expires March 30, 1953.)

the beam" for liking science fiction and now, since I loathe (best word I could think of) horror stories, I guess I'm more "off" than ever.

"The Dead Don't Die" is the only story to appear in your mag that I haven't finished and don't ever expect to. When I came to the excerpt from Edgar Allan Poe's super-horror story, I stopped. If it had not been for the rest of the stories (which I liked) and the fact that it would have broken my three-year collection of FA, I would have thrown it away.

I don't like fantasy nearly as much as I do SF, but FANTASTIC ADVENTURES is generally good enough that I buy it anyway. Please make stories like T. D. D. D. few and far between. Since many people do enjoy them, I won't be selfish and ask that they be discontinued. I will answer any cards and letters.

Chester R. Johnson
Presbyterian Sanatorium
Albuquerque, New Mexico

WHAT—NO FEUD?

Dear Ed:

Just received the November copy of FA, and was most pleasantly surprised. The cover was sexy, but good, and illustrated a direct scene from the story, thank God! In fact, there was only one thing wrong with it—the lurid color of the tie on the guy stuck in the wall. Ugh!

Now for the stories:

"The Man Who Stopped at Nothing" was wonderful. It impressed me as a comedy, even though there was no "That's no lady, that's my wife" type sequences in this novel; came much closer to the Thorne Smith tradition than Myers has ever done in my opinion. Charley's a good writer, but his Toffee series leaves me cold. More Fairman!

Next comes the shortie "He Knew All the Answers" by Dallas Ross, who always tickles my funnybone. And that ending!

"Remember Not to Die" by Rog Phillips takes third place. Veddy, veddy good. The following are in the order of their merit: "Mission Accomplished" by Wallace Umphrey; "Anything Your Heart Desires" by Steve Marlowe; and "The Girl in the Golden Wig" by Chet Geier.

Now for the Reader's Page—hey! Wha' hoppen? No feuds, nothin' really special except Covington, mostly short things.... Brrrr! Hope we'll have a better Reader's Dept. in coming issues. These were just reviews of stories, cold and analytical. Oh, for the Sarge Saturn days! Only good thing about the letters was that there was no McNamara tome to ball things up even worse! Covington's letter was good, though, about the only one.

Hear a lot of hue and cry about trimmed edges lately. Well, I'd like to see them on some other mags, but not AS or FA. I like YOUR pulp format too much. It...

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well if suits you. Trimmed edges would be out of place. You're perfect the way you are!

Think I'll get in an ad here while you're still in a good mood. I have 100 or so back issues of various stf mags, some from '27, and a lot of recent *Astoundings*, along with some 1939, '40, '43, '44 and '45 issues. Also a great deal of SS, TWS, FN, FFFM, etc. Also a great deal of books, such as a 1st issue of *War of the Worlds* which I'm letting go for only $5.00.

Well, that's about all for this issue, Ed, except please, pul ease, more Fairman!

Fantastically yours,

Robert D. McNamara
50 Plaza Street
Brooklyn 17, New York

OUR WORK IS GOOD!

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading the *Nov.* issue and I feel I must write you my congratulations.

I enjoyed every page, from beginning to end. I also agree with you very much on your opinion of "The Thing". It was an excellent idea, but the monster was lousy. He was even less horrifying than the old Frankenstein horror movies, in my opinion too.

I found Fairman's novel, "The Man Who Stopped at Nothing", a very interesting and excellent story. I enjoyed it very much. Well, here're my ratings of the stories:

(1) "The Man Who Stopped at Nothing"—very good
(2) "Remember Not to Die"—very good
(3) "Anything Your Heart Desires"—very good
(4) "He Knew All the Answers"—good
(5) "The Girl in the Golden Wig"—fair
(6) "Mission Accomplished"—just fair

As for the Reader's Page, I found it very interesting. Another thing—I certainly do not consider your covers or illustrations "indecent" in any way.

Keep up the good work.

Raymond F. Roberson
536 West 12th
Dallas, Texas

REQUEST FROM AUSTRALIA

Dear Editor:

As one of your fans of many years' standing, I wonder could I ask you to print a request of mine in your Reader's Page?

I have a complete file of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, with the exception of one solitary issue—October 1940 (Vol. 2, No. 8)—and naturally I would like to try to secure this issue in order to complete my files. So I was wondering if any reader has this issue, and would be willing to either sell it, or trade it, to me. The maga-

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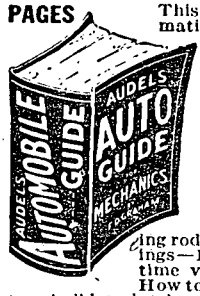

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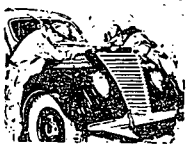

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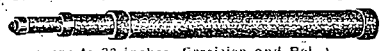

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I am also interested in hearing from anybody who has back issues of the Ziff-Davis comic book, WEIRD ADVENTURES, for trade.

Bob Jones' cover for the July ish of FA was your best this year. Give us more like it.

Roger Dard
232 James Street
Perth, Western Australia

ONE WORD DOES IT!

Dear Ed:

I just finished reading this month's (November) issue. I have only one thing to say: HOORAY!!!! What an issue! You have Phillips back. His story was EXCELLENT!!

The other stories were also far above average. I rate them as follows:

(1) "Remember Not to Die"—Phillips
(2) "The Man Who Stopped at Nothing"—Fairman
(3) "Anything Your Heart Desires"—Marlowe
(4) "He Knew All the Answers"—Ross
(5) "Mission Accomplished"—Umphrey

I haven't finished Geir's "The Girl in the Golden Wig" yet.

Is Umphrey a pen name?

Since this is my first letter to a stf mag, I'd like to state that I am 14 and have been reading science fiction for about three years. Also, I'd like some correspondence from other fans about my age.

Barry Prag
2555 North West Northrup
Portland 10, Oregon

And three cheers for you too, Barry. No—Wallace Umphrey is not a pen name. ..... Ed.

FOR PUBLISHED AUTHORS ONLY

Dear Editor:

I am now preparing for publication as a hard-cover book an INDEX TO THE SCIENCE-FICTION MGAZINES. In preparation since 1935, it covers all of the American science-fiction and most of the fantasy magazines from the first issue of AMAZING STORIES in 1926 up to the end of 1950. FANTASTIC ADVENTURES is also covered along with 43 other titles, over 1250 individual magazines altogether. All stories and articles are alphabetically listed by both author and title, and there will be checklists of all magazines indexed.

In addition, it is desired to include all the information on pseudonyms that can be *definitely verified*. To insure correctness, only information from such first-hand sources as the authors themselves, editors and agents will be used.

Therefore, I would like to ask that all authors who have used pen-names in the

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science-fiction or fantasy fields send me the information at the address below. In the case of individual pseudonyms, the name alone is sufficient. Where stories have appeared under "house names", I will need the titles of the individual stories with the by-line under which they appeared.

Since transcription of the final copy from the file-cards will begin shortly after the first of the year, the sooner this information is received, the more certain it is of inclusion.

Donald B. Day
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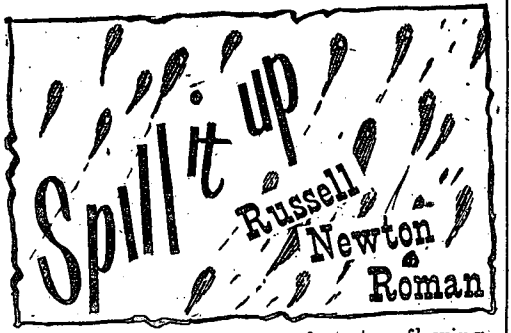

IF YOU saw a stream of water flowing up a length of spinning rope you'd probably think your eyes had gone bad. Such things just don't happen—they don't, that is, unless a couple of men with thinking heads make them happen! Two university men have come up with one of the most ingenious inventions since the self-starter.

They have invented a water pump for raising water to almost any desired level. It could be of use on farms, in industry—in many applications. In the light of the multitude of pumps we have already, this doesn't sound particularly impressive. But the way they do it does!

They use nothing but a couple of pulleys, an electric motor and a piece of rope!

The rope is made into a loop and hung over the pulley. The other end dips into the water to be raised. It goes around a pulley, too, to prevent its snarling up. Then the motor above is turned on and the pulley set spinning. The rope whirls at about forty feet per second, just the capacity of the pulley system and the ordinary motor. A layer of water clings to the rope through friction and is raised as high as twenty-five feet.

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When the water reaches the top pulley, centrifugal force throws it off and the

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It is not likely that this standard will be changed for a long time to come, because the mercury isotope is stable and enduring. Since no radioactivity is involved, if a tube of this were left untouched for a hundred million years, future men (?) could use it as a standard and if the standard they ordinarily used were still that isotope, the "heirloom" tube would check perfectly against it!. These housekeeping details of physics are really important because they put the subject on a firm foundation, with little opportunity for change. The alchemists who dreamed of transmuting mercury into gold would spin in their graves at the thought of gold's being transmuted into mercury—but we've discovered gold is expendable!

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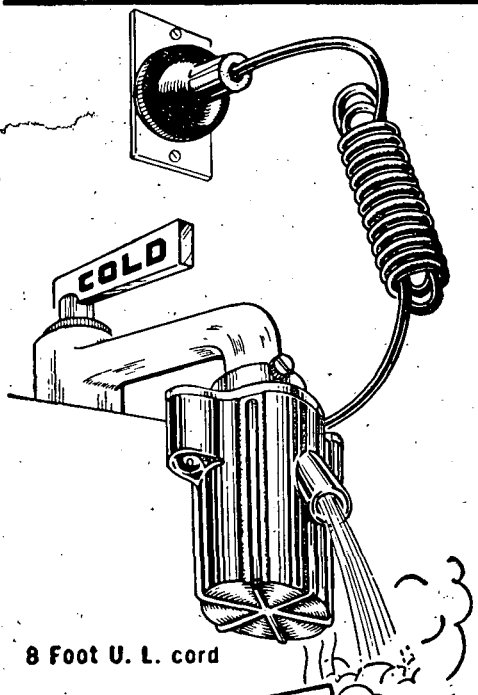

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